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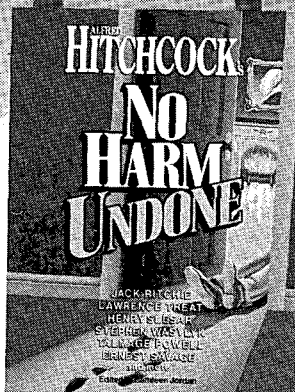


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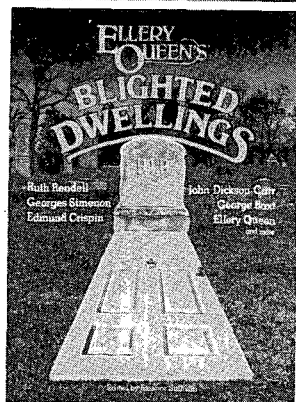
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EDITOR'S NOTES

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FICTION

Steady Money

by Bob Tippee

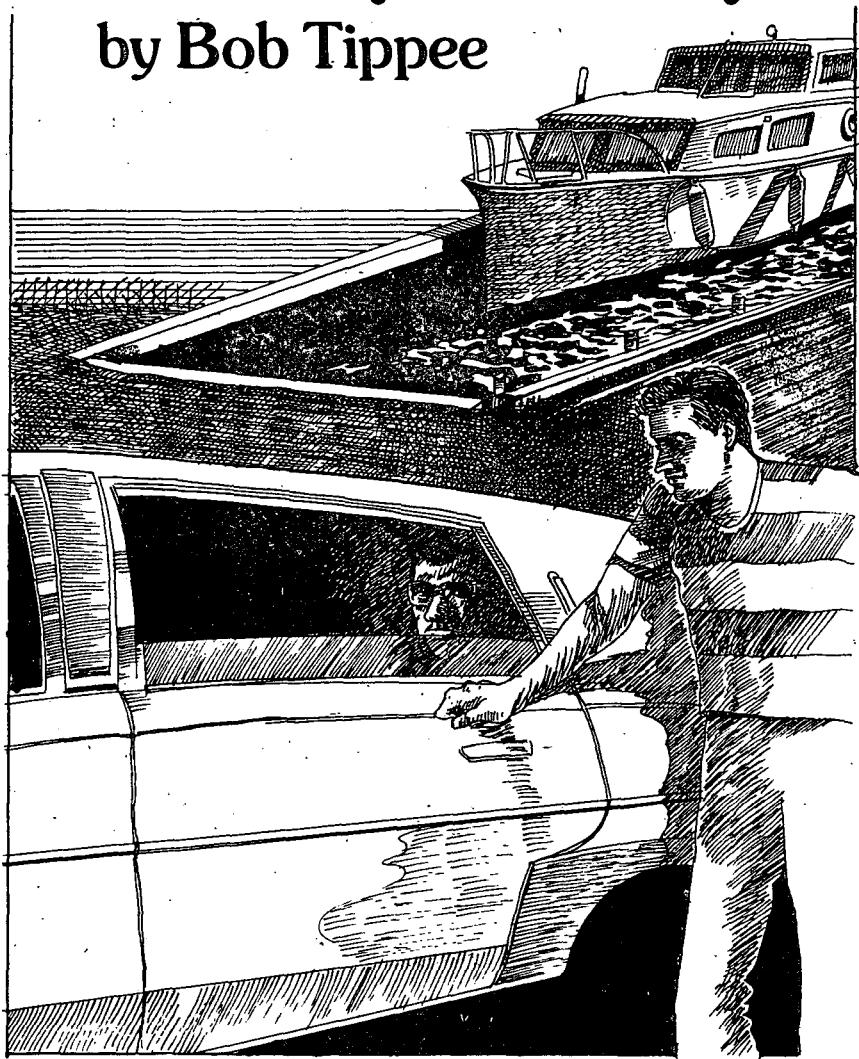


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I would have followed the rule about Taylor Wolahon's houseboat forever if Vic Toomey hadn't visited Bog Creek Cove Marina. In six months of what I hoped would be temporary employment there, I had encountered only one firm operating principle: that what went on in and around the houseboat was the exclusive business of Taylor Wolahon and Sam Duges, my former boss. It didn't matter that I had singlehandedly built the forty-foot craft's oversized slip at the far end of the deserted rental section. I was to go nowhere near it. The arrangement suited me. I had enough to do keeping the rest of Taylor's marina solvent without sticking my nose into business that wasn't mine. When all you care about is steady money, little else matters... until you've met Vic Toomey and Chester, his mind-changer.

For a person his size, Chester could be very quiet. I never heard him walk up the marina ramp to the main dock, or down the main dock itself, or onto the side dock by the fishing boats, where he waited behind a bank of equipment lockers.

He might have been there all afternoon. Since lunch I had been washing down the fifteen fishing boats that hadn't been rented all spring. A warm

Oklahoma breeze was making everything worthwhile. It swirled beneath the marina canopy, splashing little waves against the boats and pilings, stirring up the pleasant lake smells of gasoline, wet wood, and new growth. Finished with the boats, I carried my reverie and sponge bucket onto the side dock. Chester spoiled the mood with a ham-sized fist below my solar plexus.

"My boss wants to see you," he said in a raspy voice, slamming me against a four-by-four canopy support. He grabbed my jaw and twisted my head toward the gravel parking lot. Next to my old green Chevy was a new grey Buick with shaded windows all around.

Always quick to sense when my negotiating room is limited, I said between gasps, "Sounds great."

Chester smiled, and muscles flexed up both sides of his bullet-shaped skull. His hair was crewcut. He wore a grey suit with a red necktie that someone must have picked out and tied for him. When I had caught enough breath we walked to the Buick.

The right rear door swung open.

"Please get in," crooned a dark-haired man in a navy blue suit. He had sharp cheekbones and a tan. "My name is Vic

Toomey. My associate's name is Chester."

I joined Vic Toomey in the back seat, Chester slamming the door behind me and standing guard outside. I accepted Vic Toomey's handshake, seeing no alternative.

"I didn't get your name," Toomey said. The inside of the Buick was classy and immaculate.

"Rick Borman."

"Well, Rick—can I call you Rick? Good. I'll get right to the point. How much would you like for your houseboat and everything that goes with it?" He stressed the "everything."

"It's not mine."

"Of course not, Rick." Toomey cocked his head and grinned. "It just docks at your marina."

"The marina's not mine, either."

The grin faded. "Rick, I'm a busy man. There's no point playing games. As you have seen, Chester can be very persuasive. We've watched this place on and off for two weeks. We know what you do with the houseboat. You're the only person here most of the time."

"I just work here," I said, my stomach still hurting. "A man named Taylor Wolahon has owned the marina since last fall. He owns the houseboat, too."

Toomey tilted his head back and laughed.

"It's the truth," I said frantically. "I don't have any reason to lie."

Toomey raised the forefinger of his left hand. "Roll down your window, please. The buttons are on the door handle."

I groaned. The window lowered. Chester's meaty face appeared. I couldn't look any longer.

Toomey said, "Would you walk down onto the dock and see whether Oak Island is in view from there?"

"Sure thing, boss," Chester said.

I looked at Toomey, who raised his finger again. Wondering why I had been spared, I obediently closed the window.

"Chester would get a little, well, hard to control if he knew Taylor Wolahon were back in this county, or anywhere in Oklahoma for that matter. When did Taylor get out of prison, anyway?"

Prison? This was news. At least Toomey believed me.

"Mr. Toomey, I swear I don't know anything about Taylor Wolahon except that Sam Dunes got me this job when the oil business turned belly-up and we quit putting drilling deals together."

"And who is Sam Dunes?"

I swallowed. "He owns a oil company in Tulsa called D&L Producing. I was his landman until oil prices fell out of bed."

"His what?" Somehow, it didn't surprise me that Toomey didn't know the oil business.

"Landman. I negotiated leases from landowners, farmers mostly. Then I worked with a geologist to work up prospects, which we put together in deals we sold to oil companies. We'd keep pieces of most of them for ourselves. Standard stuff."

Toomey rubbed his chin. "What's Sam Dunge's connection with Taylor Wolahon?"

"I never heard of Taylor until Sam laid me off and got me this job to ride out the depression. He may have been one of our front-end investors. Sam handled all that. I always figured he got most of his backing from his father-in-law, but there could have been others. Sam was into a lot of things."

"Oh?" Toomey's eyebrows arched inquisitively.

"I didn't ask," I said. "Sam always came up with whatever money we needed. Honest. That's all I know."

Toomey must have sensed my rising panic. "Don't worry, Rick. You've been helpful. And forget about Taylor Wolahon's prison time. It was a simple business skirmish left over from the bootlegging that went on around here in the fifties. Ancient history."

The main thing I knew about the ex-bootleggers of Oklahoma was that their bodies tended to

turn up in farmhouse cisterns and the trunks of abandoned cars.

"And Taylor and Chester?" I ventured in order to dodge the more dangerous subject of ex-bootleggers' business skirmishes.

"That goes back to before there were all these big lakes in Northeastern Oklahoma. Taylor and Chester were running liquor from Missouri for their daddies, who were both bootleggers. Taylor turned rat to save his skin. Chester served some time on account of it. It's been thirty years, but he still carries a grudge."

Chester tapped on the window. I lowered it.

"You can see the island, boss."

"Thank you, Chester. We'll be going in a minute."

He raised his finger. The window rose.

"I'll have to visit Taylor Wolahon myself," Toomey said, his voice low enough that Chester couldn't have heard him from outside. "When would be a good time?"

My mind raced. Taylor came around only on Saturday evenings, when he and Sam met to do whatever it was that they did with the houseboat. This was Thursday. I needed more time.

"He doesn't come around much, and he's out of town now," I lied. "It'll be at least two

weeks. I could let you know two weeks from today when you can meet Wolahon. If you wanted to send Chester by then, there'd be no chance of his running into his old friend."

I shook Vic Toomey's hand and slid out of the car. As Chester drove it away, I stood at the end of the ramp, sweat oozing out of every pore of my body.

The next Saturday evening, Taylor showed up ahead of Sam, contrary to my hope. He waddled onto the main dock, frantic and sweaty, as always.

"I thought I told you to be gone by six o'clock Saturdays," he said. "Six o'clock!"

"I need to talk to Sam," I said from the boat-motor rack on the main dock's near-shore side. I wiped grease off my hands and set the rag atop a twelve-horse Johnson I had just tuned up.

"Did I make any money today?" Wolahon asked, avoiding my eyes.

"I doubt it. I had another inquiry about a fishing guide. Business could double if you'd let me set up a guide service."

He threw up his stubby arms. "And have you out fishing instead of working? I pay you to be on the premises. On the premises!"

"In that case, I could use twenty bucks for paint. The

fishing-boat slips are weathering fast."

Wolahon's fat face quivered. "Is that all you can do, Borman, spend my money? No, you may not buy paint."

Sam Duges drove his Corvette into the parking lot in time to keep our conversation from proceeding any farther down its futile path.

"Rick, what a surprise!" he yelled as he pranced up the ramp in his green sport shirt and brown slacks.

"How's the oil business?" I asked.

"About like the marina business appears to be," he said, scanning the mostly empty marina.

"It's the help," Wolahon said.

Sam gave Wolahon a friendly slap on the shoulder. "You should be grateful to have Rick working for you, Taylor. Best doggone landman in the oil business. Rick Borman's deals make everybody happy. Right, Rick?"

"Unemployed landman," I said. "That's why I've been calling the office."

"Hey, sorry I couldn't get back to you," Sam said. "You know how it is, shaking the bushes for some drilling money. Taylor, could Rick and I have a moment?"

Wolahon frowned. "Where's the houseboat key, Borman?"

I sighed. "You never gave me one."

"And for good reason," Wolahon snarled. "You stay away from that houseboat, you hear? Away!" He stomped down the main dock toward the houseboat slip, squeezing his pudgy hand into a trousers pocket to pry out his key ring.

Sam wasn't about to let me have the first word. "Rick, you did a smart thing selling your place in Tulsa, moving Bonnie and yourself to your trailer out here on the lake, taking this job. A lot of oil people are still trying to ride this thing out with their big house payments, staying on at the club and all. It's desperation, I tell you, and it doesn't make any sense. Yes sir, you did a smart thing, and with me having business with Taylor and connecting you with this job, well . . ."

He might have gone on forever. "I want to take my severance pay and move on," I said. "Much as I appreciate your getting me on here—"

"Rick, Rick. We're a great team, you and me. Soon as business turns around, we'll have another shot at big bucks."

I shook my head. "All I want is steady money."

Sam waved theatrically. "So what's this? Taylor pays a wage."

"That's what he calls it. He's

too tight to make a go of this business. I'll take my severance pay and try something else. I believe we agreed on fifteen thousand dollars."

"Rick, you can't just walk away from it all. This place has potential. I'll talk to Taylor about loosening up on you, maybe cutting you in on the profits."

"Sorry, Sam. I'd have to own this marina to want to stay on. I'll pick up my check tomorrow if that's convenient."

Sam turned serious. "Look, I can't say much, but we could be making deals again faster than you think. Taylor and I have developed some meeting and marketing techniques that are, well, dynamite. I need a little more time. Hang with me, Rick."

If Sam didn't have the fifteen thousand he could have raised it with one telephone call to his father-in-law. But he wanted to keep me close. Why? Vic Toomey wanted to buy out the houseboat. Why? Taylor Wolahon wanted to keep the houseboat under cover, even if that meant letting the marina crumble in around him. Why?

It might have been safer to concentrate on what I wanted, which was to take my severance pay and disappear. But these other wants—all connected with the houseboat—had aroused my curiosity. Years of

dealmaking will do that to a person. What are deals, after all, but properly aligned human wants . . . and money?

Wolahon spared me from having to decide what to do next.

"Come on, Sam," he yelled from the houseboat slip. "Borman, you're through for the day. Through! Lock the gate on your way out."

Sam turned and jogged away. "Great talking to you, Rick. We'll take this up again soon."

I let him go. The houseboat—and what went on inside it—interested me more than a fifteen thousand dollar severance check now.

My lure splashed into the dark little pocket between a half-submerged chunk of rock and a tree stump. It was a perfect cast into a perfect place for a bass. I waited until the ripples, silver rings in the moonlight, spread away and died. Then I gave the lure a twitch. At any moment, the water might explode under the attack of a ravenous bass. As a precaution against just such an eventuality, I had removed all the lure's hooks.

The brightly lighted houseboat disappeared around a rocky point fifty yards to my right. If Taylor and Sam noticed me at

all they'd think I was just another night fisherman.

When the lure was safely aboard I set my rod along the gunwale of the bass rig and toed the electric trolling motor's foot control, steering close to the shoreline toward the cove into which the houseboat had turned. After my meeting with Sam I had rushed home, eaten a quick supper with Bonnie, and put on an old fishing hat and overalls, which probably were more disguise than I needed. I even managed to work in some real fishing around Oak Island before the houseboat, just at sundown, pulled out of Bog Creek Cove.

Following unnoticed was easy. And I had brought a pair of binoculars so I didn't have to get too close.

The boat's first stop had been a little-used public landing not far from the marina. As Wolahon and Sam tied up to the dock, four well-sculpted women in cocktail dresses and high heels got out of a station wagon parked beneath a mercury vapor light by the boat ramp. Taylor waved at them to hurry aboard. That was all interesting enough, but Sam made the rendezvous even more so by greeting one of them, a redhead, with a slobbery embrace that Taylor and the other women treated as something routine.

Next stop was about a mile away at swanky Whispering Hills Resort, a meeting place for high rollers looking for luxurious, if not always legal, ways to spend their money. There, half a dozen men wearing sport clothes and holding drinks climbed aboard.

The secluded cove they now had entered was a mile and a half from the resort—unobtrusive, private, brilliant. Who would give a second look at a houseboat in a cove? The sight was almost as common as bass rigs at night, although most houseboats on the lake were smaller than Taylor's, their occupants pursuing pleasures no doubt simpler than those of Taylor's crowd. I still needed a close look to be certain what those pleasures were.

The trolling motor pulled my rig silently into the cove. I wasn't surprised to find the houseboat's curtains drawn, along with its sliding glass doors and screens leading to the square-ended seating decks fore and aft. Occasional laughter burst over the hum of the air conditioner, but I couldn't distinguish words. It was time for a swim.

I anchored against the shore, my boat hidden in shadows, stripped to the cutoffs I wore beneath the overalls, and slipped into the water. There was a

swim platform aft but the party was forward, so I breast-stroked toward the prow of the port pontoon, head up, ready to dive if a curtain opened. The boat rolled gently as I eased onto the prow and stepped over the rail onto the deck. All I needed was an opening in the curtain wide enough to peek through. This close, I could hear the sounds of ice cubes in glasses and loud conversation.

"I'm down five hundred, Brad. Can you spot me?"

"Your deal, Harry. Charlene, another round here, please."

"Stand by me, baby. You're good luck. Got any other talents? Hey, I didn't mean anything."

So Wolahon and Sam had set up a floating casino. That meant Vic Toomey was one of the operators who controlled gambling around the lake. His business was hurt by this new, innovative competition. I should have been satisfied knowing that much. Still, I wanted to see inside so I stayed on the deck, dripping water onto the rough plastic deck.

When the drapes suddenly began to open from my left, all I could do was snap my back against the narrow side wall to the right. A three foot wide shaft of light cut across the deck. The sliding glass door whooshed open.

"I'm gonna get some air." It was Sam Duges, slurring his words. "Brenda, wanna join me?"

He still had to open the sliding screen. That gave me a second.

I vaulted the port rail, trying in vain not to make a splash. Surfacing between the pontoons beneath the deck, I regretted the splash, the roll I had given the boat, and the water I had left on the deck. I could only hope that Sam and Brenda had had plenty to drink.

"Leave the door open," someone yelled. "The air feels good."

"Close it, Brenda. It's too risky. Too risky!"

"For crying out loud, Taylor, there's nobody around here. For what we're paying, we can at least enjoy fresh air."

"All right, but close the curtain and screen. Next round's on the house if you hold the noise down. On the house!"

There was a cheer. Wolahon grumbled something, and the noise subsided as the screen snapped shut.

"Ooooooh!" came the sweet voice of Brenda. "The deck's wet."

I inhaled and got ready to dive.

"That's what you get for taking your shoes off," Sam said. I slowly let the air out.

"You try walking around a boat in heels," Brenda said. She

and Sam were directly above where I was treading water. "Besides, I'm ready to go somewhere and take more than my shoes off."

There was silence for a few moments, then Brenda began purring something I couldn't understand.

Old Sam must have had some moves.

"Whoa!" he said, chuckling. "I can't break up the party so soon. Those guys are in a spending mood. Taylor'll clean their clocks after they've had a little more to drink and he can switch decks."

"You two are getting rich, aren't you?"

"Not yet. Soon. In six months or so I'll be able to repay my wife's old man. Then you and me'll get as far away from here as we can and really start to live. We gotta be careful he never learns that I used his twenty thousand bucks to buy into Taylor's houseboat. It's got to look like I'm trying to hang on in the oil business."

So that's why Sam was keeping me around.

"Just make sure you hang on with me," Brenda said.

There was another passionate silence. Then they went back inside and closed the sliding glass door. I had learned what I needed to know . . . and more.

Chester showed up at the marina on the designated Thursday.

"Well?" he asked as I joined him in the wide front seat, leaving the passenger's door open.

"Saturday night at nine o'clock. And I have an offer for your boss."

Chester winced: "Mr. Toomey don't like surprises."

"He might like the houseboat, its supplies, and its clientele for thirty thousand dollars."

"You ain't supposed to own it."

"I'm not saying I do. My offer is less than half what the boat's worth. I think Mr. Toomey would like that, don't you?"

Chester studied me, taking two or three deep breaths. "I ain't saying either way. He'll want to see the boat."

"That's all arranged." I pulled a folded piece of legal-pad paper from the pocket of my work shirt. "There are four tickets to Saturday night's cruise in here, along with directions to the pickup point. Tell Mr. Toomey that if he's interested in my deal, he and three people he can trust should be there at nine o'clock."

"I don't know . . ."

"If Mr. Toomey doesn't like this arrangement he can send you by any week day to call it off. In that case, we'll go back

to the original plan. If he does it my way, tell him to relax and enjoy himself and not say anything about buying the houseboat until I get there."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"How do I know you're not going to come around and smash me in the gut again?"

He grunted and gripped the steering wheel. I got out. As the Buick pulled away I thought about the four tickets, which I had tracked down easily enough with a few phone calls. More difficult was the paying for them: a cool thousand bucks. My last thousand bucks. I now had what they call a vested interest. And if I didn't handle everything with proper delicacy, a thousand dollars might prove to be the very least that I had at stake.

For the first time ever, Taylor Wolahon looked me squarely in the eye.

"If I did want to sell the marina, I'd want a damn sight more than seventy thousand dollars, Borman. A damn sight more! The houseboat alone is worth more than that. Where would you get the money, anyway?"

I had his attention. So far so good.

"I guess if you were inclined to sell you wouldn't worry about where your buyer got the

money," I said. "Since you're not inclined to sell I guess you should worry even less." I shrugged and stepped onto the ramp.

When I was halfway to shore and Taylor was halfway to the houseboat he turned and yelled, "It would take a hundred thousand at least. A hundred thousand! And that's if I wanted to sell, which I don't."

I didn't break stride. "Just thought I'd ask."

"Well your offer's crazy. You hear? Crazy!"

There's a certain point in any deal when you're committed. Then you just hope the pieces fall into place as you act out whatever role you've assigned yourself. I was at that point, after my surprise offer to Wolahon, as I reached my secluded trailer. Bonnie was in Tulsa visiting her mother. I had two hours to kill. I got a Budweiser and sat in one of the redwood chairs on my little sundeck, wondering what surprises might present themselves. The first one showed up when I was halfway through the beer.

Toomey's Buick pulled up the sparse truckpath that served as my driveway. I should have expected it; he'd have had no trouble finding me. Was the deal off?

Chester got out of the car,

scanned the woods, and pulled a .38 revolver from a shoulder holster under the jacket of his dark suit.

I tried to be calm. "I'm a little surprised to see you."

Chester stalked up the sundeck steps. "Mr. Toomey sent me to look after his interests."

My mind raced. I gestured toward the other chair. "Want a beer?"

He sat and kept the revolver pointed at my chest.

"Coffee then?" He just sat there. With the gun. "Well, then, um . . . Chester, what did Mr. Toomey tell you to do exactly?"

Chester cleared his throat and, not without effort, recited his instructions.

"I'm supposed to make sure you show up at some houseboat like you said and do whatever you say and not do anything rough unless you do something dumb."

Maybe Toomey was just protecting his interests.

"We've got an hour," I said. "Why not stow the iron?"

Chester, most eloquent when he said nothing, just stared at me, telling me I should get accustomed to the sight of his gun's business end. The trick here was to avoid doing anything Chester might consider "dumb." Toomey obviously wanted Chester nearby. But

why would he risk Chester's seeing Wolahon and going crazy? He was relying on me to keep that from happening. I should have been flattered.

When departure time came, I led Chester through dark woods to the rickety dock where I kept my bass boat. Chester took the passenger's seat next to the control console and kept the revolver pointed at me as I steered across the lake. I cut the motor near shore outside the mouth of the little cove.

"The houseboat will be around that point," I whispered. "I'll use the trolling motor so they won't hear us. You'll get off on the rear deck. Just wait there and stop anybody who tries to come out. I'll go in the front."

Again, the houseboat was closed up and air-conditioned, easy to approach. It dipped slightly when Chester climbed onto the aft deck. I tied my boat up to the fore rail and climbed aboard. Without hesitating I slid open the unlocked screen and glass door.

"What the hell . . . ?" Wolahon blurted as I entered the cabin. He sat at a card table to my right, his back against the port wall. "Borman, what do you think you're doing?"

The cabin was all teak and brass and thick carpet, obviously designed to inspire spending. Toomey, in sport

clothes, sat to Wolahon's left, his back to me. Two similarly dressed strangers were in the other chairs. A third, apparently sotted, slouched on a divan across the room with one of Wolahon's female decorations. Another woman stood at a locker full of bottles next to the couch, and a third stood beautifully by the card table.

"What's going on?" It was Sam, emerging from the hall leading rearward to what must have been bedrooms. A classy-looking redhead—Brenda—followed close.

"Sam. Brenda. Glad you could make it," I said. "Have a seat."

"How do you know my name?" asked Brenda. "Sam, how does he know my name?"

"I want an explanation," yelled Wolahon. "An explanation!"

I thought of Chester out back. "Please, Taylor, keep your voice down." Sam and Brenda took two captain's chairs behind the card table.

"Mr. Toomey," I said, "what do you think of the boat?"

He stared at me a moment, then said, "It has potential." Smart. I didn't give him a chance to elaborate.

"It certainly does. Taylor, I'd like you to reconsider my offer: Seventy thousand dollars for the marina and everything with it."

"I absolutely reject your offer, Borman. And not only that, you're fired. You understand? Fired!" Wolahon started to rise, but Toomey calmly set his hand on the little troll's shoulder.

"I'd like to hear what else Mr. Borman has to say," he said.

"But this is my houseboat—"

"Which I have rented for the evening," Toomey said. "Please continue, Mr. Borman."

Sam interrupted this time, his voice shaking. "I thought you were broke, Rick."

I ignored him. "Taylor, without this gambling business your marina would lose money. And there are certain competitors who would rather there be no other gambling on this lake. If they were to prevail, your marina wouldn't be worth much at all."

"You're bluffing!"

"No he's not." It was Toomey.

Wolahon was agape. He was getting the message. Was it enough?

"Seventy thousand dollars," I repeated.

"I don't believe you have that much money, Borman." So the deal needed more work from the seller's end.

"Would you like your check for thirty thousand dollars right now?" Toomey asked me.

Sam blurted, "Thirty thousand dollars for this houseboat? That's a steal!"

"Let's talk about stealing, Sam," I said. "Like you trying to steal my severance money. Fifteen thousand dollars. I want it in twenty-four hours."

Sam put on his promoter's face. "Hey, partner, you know how bad the oil business is right now."

"Yeah. So I'm going to give you the opportunity to invest in Bog Creek Cove Marina. Operated properly, it ought to make money again in a year or so. You can bring twenty thousand dollars to the office tomorrow with my severance pay. We'll close there on the marina deal once Taylor agrees to sell. Maybe you can get together with him between now and then and convince him how wise it would be for him to do that."

Sam shook his head. "You're really reaching, Rick."

"Taylor's going to have seventy thousand dollars tomorrow if he makes the right decision," I said. "I happen to know you're into this little venture to the tune of at least twenty thousand. You ought to be able to work something out with Taylor. If not, there's always your father-in-law. He might be interested to know where his last twenty grand went."

"Rick, you wouldn't!"

"And your travel plans with Brenda. If he caught wind of

those, especially by way of his daughter . . .”

Sam slumped in his chair. “All right, I’ll talk to Taylor. We can work something out.”

“Look at it this way,” I said. “Maybe we can make some deals together once the oil business turns around. Only next time we’ll both have a piece of the action, like in the marina. Thirty-five thousand. Tomorrow.”

“You can’t get away with this,” Wolahon said. “I’ve got a lot of money tied up here. A lot! No overgrown dock boy is going to take it from me.” He lunged away from the table toward the door. The man on the couch, suddenly sober, sprang to his feet to block the way. Toomey’s two other men grabbed Wolahon and wrestled him back into his chair. It was obvious that if the party didn’t end my way it would end Toomey’s way. I didn’t want to think about what that might mean.

“I’ll make trouble,” Wolahon said. “I promise you that!”

Coming from an ex-con, such a threat didn’t worry me. But I hadn’t expected Wolahon to put up this much resistance to my offer, especially after I had neutralized Sam’s allegiance to him. My deal was in jeopardy. It was time to improvise.

“Taylor,” I said, “I want you to meet someone.”

Toomey shifted in his chair but didn’t object. I walked aft.

Chester snapped his revolver toward me as I opened the door.

“It’s me,” I whispered.

“Where’s Mr. Toomey?”

I felt like I was handling dynamite. “Inside. He needs your help making a deal go through.”

“Huh?”

“All you have to do is walk into the room.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Remember what Mr. Toomey said about no rough stuff? We need to convince somebody to see things our way. He’s Taylor Wolahon.”

Even in the darkness I could see Chester turn to steel.

“I hate Taylor Wolahon,” he said.

“You can get your revenge by just walking into the room and doing nothing.”

“I want him to squirm.”

“Follow me.”

It was all on the line now. I stopped Chester midway down the hall, where he couldn’t be seen from the card table, and went the rest of the way alone. Sam was in full sweat. Taylor was grinning, confident I was about to back down.

“Last chance, Taylor,” I said.

“Preposterous, Borman. Preposterous!”

I waved at Chester. He stepped into the room, crossed his arms, and stared at Wola-

hon, the revolver showing under his jacket. The cabin was silent. Wolahon's grin vanished. His eyes bulged.

"Chester," he said. "Long time. I mean . . . uh, listen, it wasn't me who squealed."

There it was: Chester's eloquent silence. His-neck reddened. Wolahon turned pale. His mouth moved.

"Deal?" I asked.

"Seventy thousand. Sam's office. Tomorrow," Taylor said.

Then Chester boomed, "And get outta this state tomorrow night!"

"Sure," Wolahon said. "Sure."

"Let's have a drink on it," Toomey said, giving a very worried Wolahon a slap on the back.

"Wait!" It was Brenda, standing up. "You're still five thousand dollars short. I was counting."

Toomey frowned. Sam straightened in his chair. Wolahon said, "I want seventy thousand dollars tomorrow or no deal!"

All eyes were on me now. "There's something I thought Mr. Toomey and I could discuss later, but since you've brought

it up . . . This houseboat requires an oversized slip, not to mention a certain privacy. The accommodations at my marina would do nicely. Built the slip myself, as a matter of fact. Perfect fit. Private. Probably the only slip like it on the lake."

Pushing Toomey in public was not something I had wanted to do, but I had to demonstrate to Sam and Wolahon that they had no way out of the deal. Toomey wasn't the type to like being cornered, or to look like he was out of options. How would he react to this?

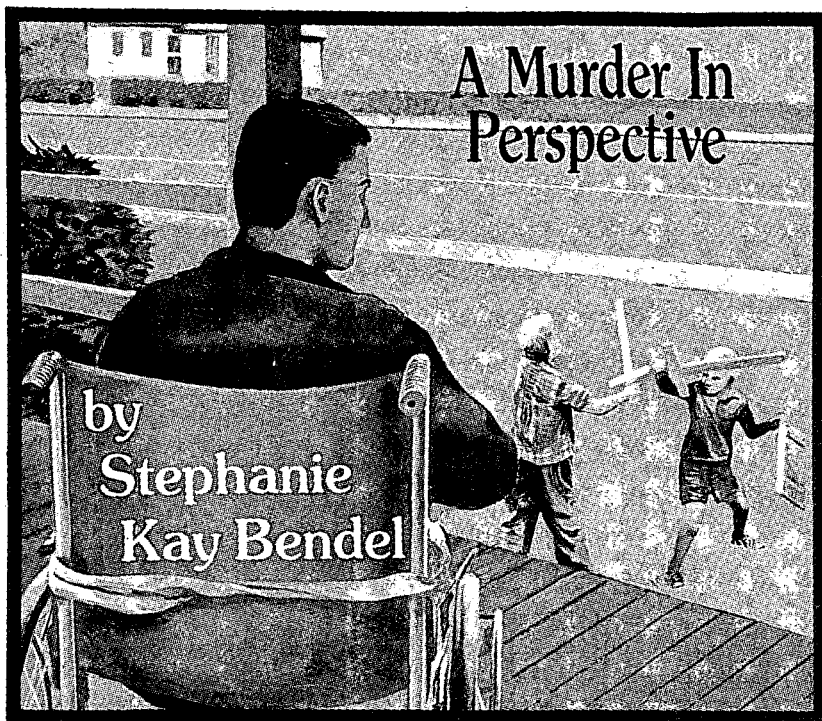
He glowered at me and inhaled deeply. His musclemen stared at him, awaiting orders. His words came crisp and clear.

"I'd like to make an advance payment on the slip rental. Let's make it ten thousand dollars. You'll need operating cash, and I like privacy."

I let out what I had feared might be my last breath.

"You've blackmailed everybody on the boat!" said Sam.

I smiled at him. "Call it what you like, partner. I call it steady money. Let's have that drink. I like everybody to be happy with the deals I make."



Perspective is all-important in the search for truth. As a judge, I have seen more than one case in which the truth appeared to be evident until a key piece of information was presented. Then what had looked so obvious was suddenly shown to be false, and the newly discovered truth seemed so apparent that everyone involved wondered why no one had guessed it earlier.

Sometimes the key piece of information comes from the least

expected place. For example, a case I heard in my court only last week accidentally presented me with an understanding of a tragedy that had occurred several decades earlier.

The case in court involved a man who had pushed another in front of a subway train with fatal consequences. That he had done the deed was not in question. There were plenty of witnesses. The problem was to determine whether the man

had been rational at the time and consequently whether to send him to prison or to the state mental hospital.

The defendant, Bert Calloway, a rather handsome man in his mid-forties, was brought before me. His sandy hair was tousled as though he had a habit of running his fingers through it. His moody blue eyes looked unfocused and apathetic, but I was well aware that some criminals are the best actors in the world. Calloway's lawyer was pleading for mercy on the grounds that Calloway hadn't fully understood what he was doing when he pushed the unfortunate soul in front of the seven forty-two express, and it was possible that the defendant was playing the part of an incompetent in order to make the lawyer's thesis look good. If so, it was up to me to find out.

"Mr. Calloway," I addressed the man, "I've read the facts in this case and I've listened to the different interpretations of those facts presented by the lawyers on both sides. Now I want to hear what you have to say. Can you tell me exactly what happened in the subway?"

Bert Calloway's eyes avoided mine. "I don't know." He hesitated a long moment, then added sullenly, "They say I did it, so I guess I did. I can't remember."

Calloway's lawyer, Harold

Perkins, a young intense man with dark, deep-set eyes and a rapid-fire tongue, interrupted. "Your Honor, this man is so obviously unable to function that he won't even *try* to defend himself. He hasn't—"

"Let him speak," I inserted gently. "And let me be the judge of his capabilities. That is why I'm here, after all."

Perkins bit his lower lip in impatience and I turned to Calloway again. "Now then, Bert, what do you remember?"

He shook his head and continued to avoid looking at me. "It's all foggy, like a dream, you know. I can't think why I'd want to kill Jack Hanks. I hardly knew him."

I consulted my notes. "But you *did* work with him. It says here that Jack was one of several men who had received a raise in pay that day. And you were one of several who'd been passed over."

Bert Calloway shrugged and stared at his shoes. "Don't seem like a reason to kill anybody," he said softly.

"Perhaps you were angry because you thought you hadn't been treated fairly," I prodded. "It *wasn't* fair," he conceded.

"But life ain't fair. Never is."

Perkins couldn't contain himself any longer. "That's right, Your Honor! This man has been dealt a bad hand from the time he was a small child.

He comes from a broken home. His father—”

“I know,” I interrupted. “That’s in his records.”

Perkins looked annoyed. “But what’s not there is that his mother remarried when Bert was seven, and even though her new husband legally adopted Bert, he and the boy didn’t get along.”

“I don’t think—” I began, but Perkins cut back in without missing a beat.

“When Bert was nine, his mother was forced to choose between her husband and her son. She chose her husband. The child was put into foster care. He’s been shuffled from one place to another and hasn’t had a decent home or anyone to love him ever since. Emotionally, he’s a cripple. Is it any wonder there are times when he can’t help what he does?”

Calloway’s lawyer paused to take a breath, and Harlan Jones, the attorney for the state, cut in. Though hardly thirty, Jones looked much older, thanks to a receding hairline and a careless paunch that hung out above his belt. “Don’t waste your pity, Your Honor,” he drawled. “Bert Calloway doesn’t deserve it. He’s been nothing but trouble all his life. Why, before he was twelve, he had a juvenile record as long as—”

“It’s not fair to hold his juvenile record against him!”

Perkins exploded. “It’s *irrelevant!*”

“Gentlemen,” I interrupted. “This is not a trial. There is no jury. I am entitled to hear *all* the information available regarding this man.”

Perkins was furious, but Jones looked smug. He said, “Then, Your Honor, perhaps you would like to see these records. To see that Bert Calloway once before tried to kill someone—a school-mate.” Jones produced a file of papers and handed them to me.

I noticed that Calloway seemed uninterested in what was happening.

“Oh, Your Honor!” Perkins shouted. “My colleague is distorting the truth! That was a simple fight between two teenage boys. Such things happen every day. To call it attempted murder is gross exaggeration.”

“It says here that he tried to push the boy out a third story window,” I cut in mildly. “Sounds like it was a bit more than a simple fight.”

Perkins’ face was mottled with suppressed emotion. “It was a rough situation. The other fellow was a bully—remember this was at the state school for boys. Bert was simply thrown in with a bunch of criminals—”

“For trying to steal a car,” Jones injected dryly.

“That was never proved!” Perkins shouted.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “let us

not get far afield." I turned to the defendant. "Mr. Calloway, can you tell me about the incident at the school?"

"I really don't remember," he said softly, staring at the wall to my left. "It was a long time ago."

I sighed. I had in front of me depositions from two well-known psychiatrists, one of whom swore that Bert Calloway was a hate-filled, amoral human being who was dangerous to the community. The second psychiatrist swore, no less vehemently, that Calloway was a pathetic victim who had been abused by his family and by society. So emotionally damaged was he (the doctor claimed) that he could not exhibit any feelings even when told he might have to spend the rest of his life in prison. His reactions to circumstances around him were unthinking and controlled by emotional responses that even he was unaware of. He certainly could not (in the opinion of the doctor) be held culpable for what he had done.

Such contradictions are not uncommon in court. For every expert who argues one side, there is another who will argue against him. It usually isn't a question of dishonesty or incompetence. It's simply a matter of perspective. And what happens in the end is that I must look at the case at hand

from my own perspective and make a ruling that may affect the defendant for the rest of his life. Such is the position of a judge.

Trying to figure Calloway out was difficult. I had studied all the police records and doctors' evaluations at length and found I had no indication where the truth lay. I had hoped that upon meeting the man, my duty would be evident. But that was not so. Calloway was an unknown quantity.

I was about to say that I would take the matter under advisement when I glanced again at the juvenile records Jones had given me. There I saw a single word that changed my perspective. I leaned forward and spoke seven words to the defendant.

Bert Calloway's head jerked up. He looked at me for the first time, and in his eyes I saw the truth.

Now, in order to explain what happened, I must digress and go back to 1947, to a time when I was a young lawyer fresh from the bar, still so grateful to have returned home from the war that I almost didn't mind the piece of shrapnel that remained in my side—courtesy of Adolph Hitler's army.

I had taken a position as an attorney for the county court and was determined to prove my ability by working longer

and harder than anyone else. My ambition was my downfall. One fine morning in early July, while I was trying to carry an armload of legal documents from one office to another, I slipped at the top of the marble staircase in the courthouse and fell to the bottom of the steps, breaking both legs in the process.

My older sister, Addie, who had been widowed during the invasion of Anzio, came to see me in the hospital. "You can't possibly manage the stairs in your apartment building, Louis. You'd be trapped alone in there for weeks! You can't go to work anyhow, so why not let me take care of you?"

She didn't have to argue long. My wheelchair and I arrived by ambulance at Addie's house the next day. Her face lit up when she saw me. She was a tiny thing, no more than ninety-five pounds, and she looked almost childlike with her copper-colored hair pulled up and wound around one of those thingamabobs that women used in those days. But since Matt had died, she had aged in subtle ways, so I was glad to see her smile.

The ambulance driver helped me into my wheelchair, and Addie pushed it—and me—up to the house. "I've had a ramp put over the front steps," she said. "Luckily for us, this house is so old almost all the doorways

are wide enough for your wheelchair to pass through. You'll have the run of the house and you can even go out on the porch or into the garden on nice days."

"Sounds good," I said, "but I'll probably be spending most of my time in bed."

Addie gave me a disapproving frown. "For eight weeks? You'd rot! It's important to keep an interest in life, Louis. I'll have to plan things for you. Well, as a matter of fact, I've *already* planned something. You're going to a party tonight."

"A party? In my condition?"

She smiled. "It's only next door and it's merely a little dinner party to greet the new neighbors—actually, they're old neighbors. Kevin and Kathleen Wilder used to live nearby, but when he was shipped overseas, Kathleen was pregnant, so she went to live with her parents. Now the Wilders are coming back and Will and Marie, who live next door, wanted to have a little welcoming celebration. We're the only other people coming, so it's not as though you'll have to cope with a crowd."

Thus it was that I found myself being taken up the front steps of the neighboring house at seven o'clock that evening. Will Gaines, a tall, blond, raw-boned man with a thin nose and pinched lips, met us and prac-

tically carried me, wheelchair and all, into the house. "There you go, Louis," he said as he positioned my chair in the living room. "I'll have Marie bring you a drink."

Marie Gaines was a fair-haired, anemic-looking woman who impressed me as someone who worked too hard and worried too much. She smiled shyly at me as she offered me a highball. "It's so nice that you could come tonight, Mr. Brent. Addie told us about your accident. I'm glad you're going to be all right."

I noticed a number of religious artifacts around the room and assumed that Marie was devoted to her church. I soon found, however, that it was Will who quoted the Bible in every other sentence. I disliked him. He struck me as one of those self-righteous know-it-alls who are always telling others what to do and how to live.

As we talked, a little blond boy of four or five peered around a doorway. "Mommy," he said somewhat indistinctly because of the finger in his mouth, "when are we going to have supper?"

Will's lips tightened. "Don't interrupt, boy. It's not respectful."

Marie, however, hastened to the child's side. "I know you're hungry, Robby. We'll eat as soon as Kevin and Kathleen get here. They probably stopped to check into the hotel first, but

they'll be here soon. Would you like some crackers and milk in the meanwhile?"

"Maybe you should feed him now and put him to bed," Will cut in. "Otherwise he'll be up too late."

Marie's face fell. "I promised him he could stay up to meet Jonathan. After all, they're going to be playmates. And Robby did have an extra-long nap this afternoon."

Will pinched his lips even more tightly. He evidently decided not to make an issue of the child's bedtime, however, for he turned to me and changed the subject. "Yes, sir, Kevin and Kathleen used to live right next door to us before the war. The four of us used to get together a lot. We had picnics and played cards and spent holidays with each other." He took another swig of his drink—it was already the second he'd had since we'd come—and I reflected that his religious beliefs apparently did not interfere with his obvious love of alcohol.

Marie smiled shyly. "It will be nice to see Kathleen again. She and I were good friends. We even—" She flushed. In those days, it was not always considered polite to mention pregnancies in mixed company. "Our sons were born only three weeks apart," Marie finished softly. She took Robby to the kitchen to get him some crackers and milk.

I glanced at Addie and found her gaze following Marie out of the room. Addie had had a miscarriage shortly before Matt was shipped out, and I knew they'd promised each other to try again to start a family as soon as he returned. Addie never spoke of that lost child, but I often noticed a faraway look come into her eyes whenever she watched small children at play. Sometimes I wondered whether my sister would ever know happiness again.

A short time later the doorbell rang and Will opened it to admit Kevin and Kathleen Wilder. Kevin was carrying Jonathan, who was dozing on his father's shoulder. A little blanket had been draped over the boy's head and upper body. "Jonny fell asleep on the way," Kevin explained. "He was overtired. Could we perhaps lay him down somewhere and let him nap?"

Marie, who had returned from the kitchen, hugged Kathleen. "Of course. Take him into our room." She directed Kevin to a darkened bedroom off the living room. "Robby will be disappointed," she said. "He's been waiting all day to meet Jonathan. I guess he'll just have to wait a little longer."

When Kevin Wilder stepped back into the living room, I saw a strikingly handsome man with warm dark eyes and thick brown

hair. He wore a neatly trimmed mustache that complemented his somewhat bushy eyebrows. Although he was a good three inches shorter than Will, Kevin had a muscular build and broad shoulders that somehow made him seem the bigger of the two men.

Kathleen Wilder, a slender dark-haired beauty, had large doe's eyes. She offered me a delicate hand and a lovely smile as we were introduced. "So you're Addie's brother," she said in a low musical voice. "I remember her telling us about your accomplishments at law school when we used to live here. She's very proud of you."

The newcomers sat down and were offered drinks and the conversation resumed, only to be interrupted by the little awkward fits and starts that are common when people who haven't seen each other for years try to reestablish a friendship.

We must have been talking for about five minutes when little Robby Gaines walked into the living room, a half-eaten cracker in his hand. "Is Jonathan here yet?" he asked.

The effect of his entrance was electric. Kathleen Wilder dropped her glass, spilling her drink on her leg. She seemed unaware of anything but the boy. Her eyes were wide with horror, and her left hand flew to her mouth.

Kevin, too, was affected. All the color left his face. He slumped into his chair as if his bones had suddenly dissolved.

The rest of us were mystified. Addie took a napkin and tried to wipe up the spilled drink. Marie asked, "Kathleen, are you all right? What's the matter?"

The answer was soon evident. A second small boy, rubbing his eyes with one hand and dragging a little blanket with the other, appeared in the bedroom doorway and said, "Mommy, where are we?" Now it was time for the rest of us to gasp.

Jonathan Wilder was the mirror image of Robby Gaines. The two could have been identical twins.

The children stared at each other, and the silence in the room was sickening. It seemed to last forever. Addie looked at me, and I knew she felt as I did—that our presence at that moment was terribly embarrassing.

"I—I think we had better go, Addie. I—I'm not feeling well," I said.

She nodded and stood up. "I'm sorry," she said quickly to Marie. "We must leave. It was stupid of me to expect Louis to be able to go out tonight. After all, he's just been released from the hospital."

We murmured awkward

goodbyes and Will and Kevin carried me down the front steps. Addie wheeled me home in silence.

When we were safely in her house, she turned to me. "Well, it seems that we are going to witness quite a scandal."

"Could there have been a mixup at the hospital?" I asked. "Twins separated. Mother gets wrong child. It happens."

Addie shook her head. "I don't see how that could be the case here. The boys were born several weeks apart, and in two different states."

The room was somewhat stuffy and she opened the window. Through it, we could hear the sound of a car driving off. A moment later, the night air carried angry voices from next door.

We couldn't make out the words, but the situation was plain.

"I wonder what they're going to do," Addie murmured. She rummaged in the icebox and found the makings for a hasty meal. She poured two glasses of milk and wheeled me to the kitchen table.

"Who do you think did what to whom?" she asked as she placed a chicken sandwich in front of me.

I cleared my throat. "I think it's obvious that someone has been sleeping in someone else's bed. The question is: Which

man is the father of both boys? I vote for Will."

Addie shook her head as she sat down. "But he's so religious! Do you really think he'd commit adultery?"

I chuckled. "Have you forgotten your Hawthorne? The good Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale—the self-righteous adulterer! The religious ones are the worst kind of sinners, I find. Besides, I like Kevin Wilder. He strikes me as a decent man, and with a wife like Kathleen, why would he look elsewhere? And Will is fair, and so are both boys."

Addie took a healthy gulp of milk. "That doesn't mean a thing," she argued, wiping a bit of milk from her lip with a napkin. "A dark-haired couple can have a fair-haired child. You know that. Besides, I knew Kevin before he and Kathleen were married, and he used to be quite a ladies' man. And with Will being the cold fish that he is, I can easily understand Marie's being attracted to Kevin. On the other hand, I can't picture Kathleen lusting after a man like Will."

We debated into the night, coming to no conclusion.

The next morning a moving truck arrived with the Wilders' furniture. I sat on the porch in my wheelchair and watched the men across the street unload-

ing household goods. Little Jonathan played on the grass. Kathleen and Kevin busied themselves directing the men. Even from that distance, I could tell things were not going well between the two of them.

I had half expected they wouldn't move in after the scene the night before, but when I thought about it, they didn't have much choice. With all the soldiers who'd returned from the war, jobs were scarce. And housing was even harder to find. They were trapped.

Addie returned from the grocery store around lunchtime. "What's happening?" she asked.

"I think we're seeing at least one family on the verge of dissolution," I replied, maneuvering myself through the front door after her. "Things look pretty tense across the street."

"Divorce may be the least of it," she said as she put the milk and cheese into the icebox. "This morning when I left the house, Kevin was out in his yard with the moving men. Will came out to leave for work, and the two of them exchanged words. I couldn't hear what they said, but if looks could kill—"

She broke off and went to the window, hugging herself as if she were cold in the July heat.

"I'm frightened, Louis," she said softly. "I have a feeling something terrible is going to happen."

But nothing terrible did happen, at least not for a while. The days passed, one after another: endless, hot, and boring. I grew impatient for my legs to mend and longed for the day when I might return to my little flat and my work. Addie brought me an armload of books from the library, and I attempted to read them, but reading in a wheelchair is not a very comfortable activity. I found myself forced to hold my book up as I read, and my arms quickly tired. When I tried resting the book on my lap, I had to hunch over to see the print. Then my shrapnel wound bothered me and my back soon went into spasms. More and more I took to spending the long days doing nothing but sitting on Addie's white-washed porch, surrounded by flower boxes of red geraniums, and watching the rest of the world go by.

The evenings were less monotonous. After dinner, Addie and I would sit in the parlor, listening to the radio. I'd read the paper and she'd crochet. Sometimes we played gin rummy or worked on a jigsaw puzzle. And almost every evening, through the open window, we heard angry voices from either the house next door or the house across the street. Occasionally the shouting would be interrupted by the slam of a

door or a sudden silence. In a strange way, the silences were more frightening than any of the noises. At such times, Addie would look at me and the two of us would sit expectantly for a few minutes before resuming whatever we had been doing.

"You know what we're waiting for, don't you?" Addie said to me one evening during an especially ominous silence. "One of these nights, we're going to hear a gunshot. I wonder who will be killed."

I laughed, but I was half afraid she was right.

One dreary morning in mid-July, I was sitting at the kitchen table, enjoying a second cup of coffee and working on a crossword puzzle while Addie did the breakfast dishes. Outdoors, rain was falling steadily; indoors, everything felt clammy and oppressive. I was struggling to find a seven letter word meaning "ridge formed by a glacier" when the doorbell rang. To my surprise, Addie dropped the dish she was holding and burst into tears.

I looked at her in alarm. "Are you all right? You didn't cut your hand, did you?" I couldn't imagine what had happened.

She shook her head and picked up the broken dish. The bell sounded a second time, and Addie dabbed at her eyes with the

corner of her apron. "I'd better get that," she said.

"No, you sit down. I'll get it." With determination I maneuvered my chair around the table. "There are still a few things I can do."

At the door I found only the postman with a package of things Addie had ordered from Sears and Roebuck. When I returned to the kitchen, I saw that Addie had cradled her head in her arms on the table and was sobbing violently.

"Addie?"

She looked up at me. "Oh, Louis, I'm sorry. I'm such a fool! It's just that—" She stopped to swallow, and I offered her my handkerchief. She wiped her eyes. "That morning was just like this one. It was raining. I was doing the dishes, and the doorbell rang. There was the Western Union boy with the telegram saying that Matt—" She shook her head and began to cry again.

I have never in my life wanted anything so much as I wanted that moment to be able to stand on my own two feet and put my arms around my sister. The best I could manage was to work my chair up beside hers and put one arm about her shoulders.

She turned her teary green eyes to mine. "What's the matter with me, Louis? Why can't I be strong? It's been more than

three years, and I still miss him so much!"

I squeezed her shoulder. "Of course you do! Your emotions are nothing to be ashamed of."

She blew her nose. "Sometimes everything comes back so vividly. It's as if I'm losing Matt all over again."

"Feelings are like that," I said gently. "They sometimes take on a force of their own. And the greater the loss, the stronger the feelings. They can be overwhelming. Look, you just sit there and I'll make you a nice cup of tea. In a little while, things will seem better."

I rolled my chair over to the stove and turned on the fire beneath the kettle. Then I reached for the cup and saucer Addie always left beside the sink for me. But when I looked for the tea canister, I saw that it was on a shelf just beyond my reach. I strained for a few moments and then, feeling utterly humiliated, turned to my sister, who was still sniffing softly.

"Addie," I said, "I can't reach the canister."

She looked at me and wiped a tear from her cheek. I shrugged helplessly and she smiled. Then she giggled. In a moment, we were both laughing.

Jonathan and Robby both spent most of the day outdoors whenever it wasn't raining and, quite natu-

rally, began playing together. I filled a good many hours observing the two of them.

"It's very interesting," I said to Addie one day at lunch. "The boys obviously share a good deal of genetic material. Yet their personalities are quite different."

"What do you mean?" she asked, pouring me a glass of lemonade.

"Well," I said, "Jonathan is friendly, almost puppylike. He's perfectly willing to play whatever game Robby suggests. And of the two, Jonathan is more active. He's always running, tumbling, or climbing."

"Robby, on the other hand, is quieter and more withdrawn. He seldom smiles, I notice, and he's quicker to tears when things don't go his way."

Addie passed me the fruit salad. "Perfectly understandable. Look at their parents. Jonathan is a happy, outgoing child because his father is as outgoing as men come. And even though Kathleen is quiet, she's very affectionate. She never walks past the boy without giving him a hug."

My sister had a good point. Robby's parents provided a decidedly different atmosphere for him. Will was cold and forbidding. I hadn't forgotten his tight-lipped admonition: "Don't interrupt, boy. It's not respectful." And though Marie

obviously cared about the child, she radiated more anxiety than warmth. I felt sorry for Robby.

Actually, I reflected later that day, I felt sorry for just about everybody: myself with two useless legs, my widowed, childless sister, the four adults whose lives had suddenly been turned upside down, and the two little boys who sensed that something was terribly wrong between their parents and who could not understand what had happened.

Well, to tell the truth, I didn't feel very sorry for Will. Whatever his part in the drama that was unfolding, I couldn't sympathize with him. Each morning I watched him slam the door as he left his house to go to work at the mill, his lunch pail hanging from one clenched fist, a glower on his face. I remember thinking that if Will had fathered Jonathan, he wasn't offering any apologies to his wife. And if Marie had been the unfaithful party, Will hadn't found any forgiveness in his heart, despite all his religious protestations.

I discovered exactly what Will thought by accident one morning. Little Robby came over to Addie's porch after his father had left for work. He sat on the floor near my feet and looked up at me.

"Mr. Brent, do you think God sends mommies to hell?"

I looked at the little boy in astonishment. "Why on earth would you ask something like that?"

"My daddy said that's what will happen to my mommy if she doesn't do what he says."

I was shocked, I admit, that any adult would say such a thing in front of a child, but I still have no excuse for what I did next. I pried. "What does your father want her to do?"

"To tear up some papers. He said the Bible says she has to. Then he hit her." Robby frowned. "Mr. Brent, what's a divorce?"

I have nothing against religious people; in fact, I usually admire them. But when a person behaves in an unchristian manner in the name of religion, it turns my stomach. Following that conversation, even the mention of Will Gaines made me slightly ill.

A few days later, Kathleen Wilder was passing Addie's house on her way back from the grocer's. She greeted me with a tired smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brent. How are you feeling?"

"A little better each day," I said. "It's a pity broken bones take so long to mend. But the doctor says I can go home around Labor Day."

"That's good." A look of sadness came into her wide brown eyes as she hugged her bag of

groceries more tightly. "I wish I could go home," she said softly.

I glanced at the house across the street, then back at her. She followed my train of thought. "Oh, that's not home. And it'll never be home now." Tears welled in her eyes and she blinked quickly to make them go away.

I hesitated, searching for the right words. "It's been a difficult time for you," I said gently.

She nodded. "I wish—I wish we'd never come back here. Everything was all right until we came back."

Little Jonathan echoed her words to me a couple of days later. He'd been chasing a butterfly and followed it as far as Addie's front lawn. Then the tiny creature caught an updraft and fluttered above the rooftop, and Jonathan plopped down on the front steps, discouraged.

I smiled at him. "Don't give up. You'll catch one eventually."

"No, I won't." The boy shook his blond head and stuck out his lower lip. "Nothing goes right any more. I wish we'd *never* moved here."

I was struck by the similarity between his words and Kathleen's. Then I realized that he'd probably heard those words from his mother. It occurred to me that children hear and understand much more than adults ever give them credit for. It also

occurred to me that I had not seen Jonathan smile lately. In the days that followed, I was to see his normally sunny disposition become solemn. A little worried frown frequently visited his face, and I reflected that the two boys had become more alike than ever.

It was in the third week of my convalescence that the tragedy took place. Or perhaps the tragedy had begun a long time ago and now was merely growing. At any rate, it was a Wednesday, I remember. Addie was out doing some errands. The skies had clouded over around mid-morning, and I had gone indoors. Feeling listless and out of sorts, I wheeled my chair into my bedroom and managed to flop onto the bed where I fell asleep.

Around two o'clock, Addie shook me awake. "Louis! Oh, Louis! Have you heard?"

"Heard what?" I muttered groggily, blinking my eyes to get rid of the sandy sensation in them.

"Little Jonathan! He's disappeared! No one has seen him since this morning. Did *you* see him?"

I had to think for a moment. One day seemed so much like another to me. "Yes," I said finally. "He and Robby were playing in Jonathan's front yard early this morning. Around nine or nine thirty, I'd say. I remem-

ber they both went home quite early, and I had no one to watch. The weather had turned foul, and I was uncomfortable, so I came inside. Has anyone talked to Robby?"

"Yes, but he says the same thing as you do. That they played together for a while, and then Jonathan went home, so Robby went home, too." Addie's brows knitted into a little frown, and she added, "Kathleen says Jonathan did come in for a few minutes, but then he went back outdoors."

"That must have been after I went in," I said. "I didn't see him come out again."

Addie nodded. "Kathleen's beside herself. They've called Kevin. He's coming home from work. I'm going to go out and help look for Jonathan."

I sat up. "Help me into my chair. I'll come, too."

She looked at me in surprise. "But what can you do?"

I set my chin. "I can go up and down the street. Stop people and ask them whether they've seen the boy. I can keep an eye out, and I can shout with the best of them. It's only my legs that are out of order, you know."

She hugged me. "Bless you, Louis. I do hope we find him. He's such a dear little boy."

The whole neighborhood turned out to look for Jonathan. Searchers poked through the

bushes and the woods and looked under porches and in sheds, but there was no sign of the child.

It wasn't until the following morning that the little body was found lying at the bottom of a gully some four blocks from his home.

"Must have gone exploring. Boys that age'll do that," someone said. "Must have stood too close to the edge and fallen. If he hadn't hit his head on that rock, he might have lived."

Kathleen and Kevin were devastated. Whatever differences had stood between them now dissolved in sorrow. Kevin's family consisted only of his father, who had moved to Oregon, so the funeral was held in Kathleen's home town in order that the child could be buried in her family's plot. Addie and I sent flowers and our condolences.

About a week later, the Wilders returned to the little house across the street and attempted to put their lives together. One afternoon Kevin, coming home from work, saw me and came up to the porch.

"How are you doing, Mr. Brent?"

"Call me Louis, please. I'm doing all right. But more important, how are *you* doing? I didn't get a chance to tell you in person how sorry Addie and I were about Jonathan. I had come to know him quite well,

and I liked him very much."

At my words, tears came to Kevin Wilder's eyes. "He was a little angel," the man said softly. "I—I guess everyone knows by now that he wasn't mine—but I loved him, Louis. I couldn't have loved him more. I don't understand why this happened."

He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. "It's a terrible thing to have to admit, but do you know the first thought that came to my mind when they found Jonathan?"

I shook my head and he answered his own question. "I wondered why this was happening to us. Will Gaines was the one who deserved to be punished. It should have been *his* boy. God help me, that's exactly what I thought."

"It was a bad moment for you, and you had good reason to hate Will Gaines," I said.

Kevin Wilder looked at me. "I—I don't know you very well, and I hope you won't—" He broke off and gave me an agonized look. "God, I haven't been able to talk to *anyone* about this!"

"I'm an attorney," I said gently. "I'm bound to keep a great many confidences. I give you my word that what you say here will go no further."

He let out a long-pent-up sigh. "You were there that night when—when we first saw the

boys together. I realized at once, of course, that the two had to be brothers, and that meant that Kathleen and Will—" He closed his eyes and shuddered.

He went on, "When we got back to the hotel, I accused her, and she broke into tears and told me the whole story. It had happened when we lived here before. I was out of town on business one evening, and Kathleen went over to see Marie about a dress pattern, but Marie wasn't home and Will was. He'd been drinking. Kathleen said he grabbed her and forced himself on her. Afterward, she was too frightened and ashamed to tell anyone, even me." He looked down at his feet. "*Especially* me, I guess," he said softly.

"Later, when she found she was pregnant, she thought it was my child because she couldn't bring herself to believe otherwise."

"That's understandable," I said. "I hope you don't blame her."

He shook his head. "Not any more. But I did at first. I felt betrayed by my friend and my wife. She'd kept that secret from me all these years. It's only been since—since Jonny died that I've realized Kathleen's been hurt more than I have."

"She's a fine woman," I said. "Take good care of her."

He nodded. "I only wish we

hadn't had to lose Jonny to find each other again." He looked at me. "She didn't want to move back here, but she wouldn't tell me why. If only she had!"

A day or two later, I spoke with Kathleen.

"We're leaving, Mr. Brent. We—we simply can't stay here any longer."

I nodded. "Has Kevin found a new job yet?"

She shook her head. "But it doesn't matter. We'll stay with my parents until he finds one." Her wide brown eyes were bright with moisture, and I put out my hand to touch hers.

"I'm very sorry. I hope that wherever you go, you find—" I hesitated. I'd almost said "happiness," but that wasn't the right word. Finally I said, "—peace."

She nodded and turned to go, then paused. "Mr. Brent, you're an educated man. Perhaps you can tell me something."

"Anything," I said.

"I—I once heard someone say that when parents—have difficulty getting along, children sometimes—" She put her hand to her mouth as if what she was about to say was too horrible to contemplate. She swallowed and went on, "—that often children blame themselves for what has gone wrong. Sometimes at night, I wonder whether Jonathan thought—"

She stopped and turned her

face away. As the meaning of what she had said dawned on me, I summoned all my self-control.

"Kathleen," I said, "you must listen to me! Jonathan was a happy little boy who knew that both his parents loved him very much. What happened to him was an accident. You must believe that."

After Kathleen left, however, I found myself haunted by her suggestion. I kept remembering how Jonathan's smile had disappeared, how quiet and solemn he'd been in the days before his death. But surely, I argued with myself, a child so young would never reach the depths of despair that prompted one to take his own life. I shook the thought away. I couldn't even bear to think it. And poor Kathleen had been living with that nightmarish idea!

It wasn't long after that incident that I chanced to overhear a conversation between Will Gaines and Robby. Looking for a change of scenery, I had wheeled my chair into the garden, into the shade of a row of lilac bushes. I was dozing lightly when I heard voices on the other side of the bushes.

"Daddy, when is Jonathan coming back?"

"He's not coming back, boy."

"Not ever?"

"Not ever. He's gone to the bosom of the Lord."

There was a little silence, and then, "Is that good, Daddy?"

"Of course it's good, boy. We all want to go to the bosom of the Lord. Besides—" Here his voice dropped so low that I almost missed his next words. "—Jonathan Wilder wasn't ever supposed to exist."

I am, I believe, a gentle man who seldom experiences violent emotions. I have hated exactly two people in my life. One was a sadistic drill sergeant I had in the army, and the other was Will Gaines.

I began to wonder whether this twisted, unloving man could have been so vile as to destroy his own son. After all, it had been Jonathan's appearance that had exposed Will's sin. And if I was any judge, Will Gaines was going to lose his wife and son as a result of that exposure. Was it possible that he had blamed little Jonathan? The mill where Will worked was a hectic place with hundreds of employees, and it was less than ten minutes' walk away. Had he slipped out for a while that Wednesday? It was conceivable that he had done so, and that no one had noticed.

I wondered.

Kevin and Kathleen left town a few days later, and less than a week after that, Addie announced that Marie was divorc-

ing Will and moving away, taking little Robby with her. I was not surprised, of course, and I admit to feeling more than a little satisfaction. Will Gaines deserved to be alone and unloved.

And alone and unloved he was. For the next couple of weeks I watched him trudge home after work, heard him slam his front door, sometimes heard him breaking things in the little house, and more than once saw him stagger—blind drunk—to his car and drive off, tires squealing.

The final act of the tragedy, or what I thought was the final act, played itself out late in August, on one of my last evenings at Addie's. She and I were playing cards in the dining room, and the windows, as usual, were open. Earlier we'd heard Will banging around in his house, but things had been quiet for the last hour or so.

"Gin," Addie crowed triumphantly. "Ninth time in a row! If we'd been playing for money this evening, you'd now owe me seventy-four dollars and thirty-six cents."

"You're too good for me," I conceded. "How about getting me a cup of coffee?"

Addie was just going into the kitchen when we heard a loud report.

"Was that a backfire?" Addie

asked, looking at me with some alarm.

I shook my head. The war was too fresh in my memory for me to mistake the sound for anything but what it was. "That was a gunshot. Call the police, Addie."

We soon learned that Will Gaines had blown his brains out.

"I can't say I'm sorry," I said to my sister the next morning over breakfast. "The world is well rid of that man."

Addie looked thoughtful. "I didn't like him, either," she said, "but I can't help wondering whether Will wasn't a bit of a victim, too."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "How can a man like that be a victim? Him and his overbearing, holier-than-thou attitude?"

Addie toyed with her egg. "I think a lot of people who are overly religious are really overly afraid. They want everything to be neat and orderly—black and white—so they can understand and deal with the world. And they're terrified when people or situations can't be neatly categorized. They feel they don't have any control over their lives."

I thought about her words as the doctor removed my casts that afternoon. As usual, my sister had a point. Perhaps Will had turned to religion because

he couldn't cope with his own human weaknesses, and turned to drink because religion hadn't erased those weaknesses. Perhaps he really didn't understand the role he had played in his own unhappiness. In court I had occasionally encountered people who, while not unintelligent, were somehow stunted in their ability to comprehend simple truths of life, truths such as: there are some things that are beyond our control, and there are some things for which no one should be blamed, and sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we make mistakes and need to be forgiven.

I returned to the city a few days later and soon was engrossed in my lawbooks and my work. That autumn Addie met Michael Barrows, a fine and decent man who knew a good woman when he saw one. They were married the following spring and over the years were blessed with four children and three grandchildren. Once in a great while I thought about the drama that I had seen unfold that summer, but for the most part, the tragedy was forgotten.

That is, until last week when Bert Calloway stood before me in court, his eyes averted. Was he an evil man or a sick one? I glanced again through the pa-

pers on my desk and considered postponing my decision. But then I noticed one line in the juvenile record. It said, "Robert Gaines Calloway."

I stared at the middle-aged prisoner. So this was what had become of Robby Gaines. Suddenly I saw not a sullen man of forty-five but a little boy who was seeing his world fall apart and could make no sense of what was happening except that, with the unerring instinct of a child, he knew the trouble had begun with the appearance of Jonathan Wilder. I imagined the force with which his feelings had descended upon him. And I saw where the maelstrom of his emotions might have carried him.

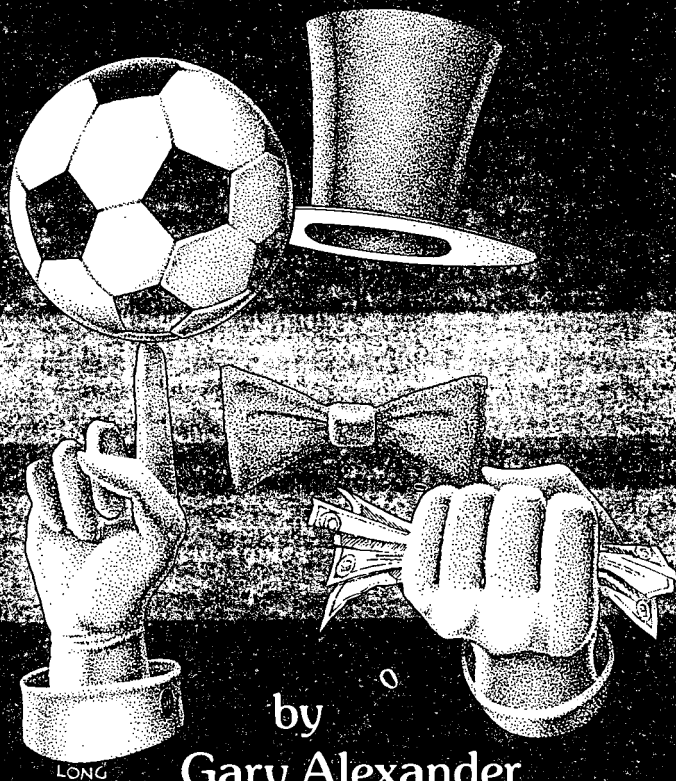
I leaned forward and said softly to him, "I know what happened to Jonathan Wilder."

His head jerked up then, his eyes met mine, and I knew that I had guessed correctly.

I remanded Bert Calloway to the state mental hospital with special instructions that he be seen by a certain psychiatrist, the best available. And for the first time, I found myself wondering what had happened to Will Gaines during *his* childhood, for from my new perspective, I understood how deeply buried lie the roots of tragedy.

FICTION

Rambaugh And The Missing Gunman



by
Gary Alexander

Frank Rambaugh earned his living listening to people lie to him.

After twenty years of handling insurance claims, little fazed him. Not the white lies, not the whoppers, not even hardcore fraud. Such was inevitable, he believed, a cost of doing

business as unavoidable as rodents in a grain silo.

Irritations came from within. One awaited on his desk Monday morning. Paperclipped to a file folder was a memo penned in red: URGENT!!! C ME ASAP!!!! D.O.

Rambaugh sat down heavily,

began to open the file, said to hell with it, and marched into David Oakes's office, wondering if the man would ever learn that the only thing on earth "urgent" was being trapped in a traffic jam after four cups of coffee.

"Frank, you're an hour late. I was worried," David Oakes said as he lighted a cigarette. "Have you had a chance to leaf through the file? It's a beaut. I guess the kidnapping is no surprise. You must have heard about it on the radio on your way in."

Rambaugh cleaned his glasses on his tie and opened the folder. "David, my company car has only an AM radio. No FM, no cassette. I tolerate that chatter and alleged music for the traffic reports. When I realize I am hopelessly gridlocked, I shut it off. A semi jackknifed on the freeway ahead of us and overturned. It was transporting frozen chickens."

Frank Rambaugh was senior property claims investigator for Unity Property and Casualty Insurance Company. David Oakes, Unity's Seattle claims manager, was a decade his junior and only in a sense his superior. Rambaugh was assigned the largest and trickiest losses in the ten-office Western Division.

Oakes was regarded in the

company as a comer, an obedient workaholic moving on a relentlessly upward plane toward Home Office and A Great Future. He had topspin, everyone said.

Rambaugh had no topspin. He liked his status quo. His career goal was modest in the eyes of most: to do a better job today than he had done the day before.

Rambaugh and Oakes understood one another. Rambaugh understood Oakes's craving for advancement and sympathized with the stress and bureaucratic pummeling the man endured. It was, after all, the American way. Oakes understood that Rambaugh required a long, loose leash.

"Frank, Lazslo Brank has been kidnapped. His country's secret police came in and snatched him!"

"It is unusually warm for a spring morning, David. The freeway pavement was steamy from an earlier rain shower. The chickens were thawing when I finally passed them."

Oakes lighted a cigarette from the one he was smoking. "Frank, please!"

Rambaugh read the cover sheet of the file. The Unity policyholder was Seattle Soccer Club Enterprises, Inc., d.b.a. the Gunmen. "Ah, indoor soccer. My son is a sports buff. He

has attended several games with friends and is a devoted fan. He loves professional spectator sports almost as much as playing with his computer."

"Lazslo Brank is their superstar, Frank. He's the franchise. He didn't show up for practice yesterday. Team officials went over to his condo last night. The place was a mess."

"Why would anybody's secret police do that?"

"Jesus, Frank, don't you read the sports page? Don't you know who Lazslo Brank is?"

"I enjoy baseball to an extent. If I have trouble sleeping, a night game on television is wonderfully soporific. I do recall Brank's name. A big splash concerning him several months ago? He defected from a Soviet Bloc country to play for the Gunmen?"

"Right. Mulgoria. The People's Socialist Republic of Mulgoria. It's one of those off-brand commie countries shoehorned into the Balkans or somewhere. It's run by a real nasty and paranoid gang. They raised a huge stink when Gunmen officials connected with Brank in Vienna last fall. He was playing there at a tournament with the Mulgorian national team. The Gunmen snuck him out of the team's hotel, signed him for megabucks, and got him on the first plane headed west."

"Good Lord, David, what are we doing insuring a professional sports team? Their primary capital assets are human beings with knee tissue asked to behave normally in abnormal conditions."

"Frank, please don't leave here and run over to Sales and call them prostitutes again."

"Somebody drew a nice commission, no doubt."

Oakes shrugged. "The premium was right: Over ten grand per year."

"And our loss exposure because of the missing Mr. Brank?"

"In the millions, I'm afraid."

"Ah, a wonderful client to land. If only Mother Unity had been in business a century ago. We could have written group life on the Seventh Cavalry. And later on, hull coverage on the *Titanic*."

Oakes moaned. "Frank!"

"Very well. Who am I to see?"

"Biff Wooster. He's expecting you. He's the Gunmen's managing general partner."

"How is the team doing financially?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. This is their second season in the league. Last year they lost a bundle. They signed Brank to increase attendance and he did. Brank was a star on the Mulgorian national team and was regarded as one of the best out-

door soccer players in the world, if not *the* best. He's just as good indoors and he's carried his team singlehandedly. So please don't get the notion that they're behind the kidnapping and call Wooster or anybody else down there a crook. Please."

"Word of honor. Unless."

"Unless what?"

"Unless it is true. Mother Unity does not pay me merely to write checks."

Frank Rambaugh was a tall, fleshy, middle-aged man. Because of his bulk, he was perceived by some as a former athlete who had bolted to seed. A linebacker emeritus, perhaps. Or a basketball forward.

The observations were erroneous. In his prime athletic years, Rambaugh had been a tall, fleshy youth. He enjoyed sports, but seldom participated in the organized variety. That he lacked ability and strength made him easy prey for scrappy little guys *with* ability and strength. When they played David-Goliath with Rambaugh it was a no-lose situation.

Thus his distaste for sports competitiveness carried over into adulthood. Beginning in the early 1970's he had for the most part ignored the sports page. In his view, pure physical endeavor had been displaced by

litigation and pouty millionaires. Reading the sports section became an unnatural act.

This morning, though, before his appointment with Biff Wooster, he went to his desk and pored through it all. Most was devoted to Brank and the Gunmen, not to mention a front page headline and cover story.

Items gleaned:

The Mulgorians had been perturbed since the defection. Lazzlo Brank was their first soccer superstar and his presence on their national team had permitted them for the first time to be internationally competitive. After his defection, they were again relegated to mediocrity. Following an 8-0 loss to Algeria, they withdrew from further competition.

The Mulgorian Foreign Ministry made numerous and vague threats. Mulgoria was economically puny and did not have formal diplomatic relations with the United States. Brank had left no close family behind. Therefore, the threats were not taken seriously.

Preliminary blame for the kidnapping was being assigned to the Mulgorian Research Bureau (MRB), their secret police, a toy version of the KGB. Few Mulgorians lived in North America and no MRB agents were known to be in the U.S. But under the circumstances,

the MRB was being taken seriously.

An action photograph of Brank depicted a smallish, swarthy man with shaggy hair and muttonchop sideburns. But for legs like Popeye's, he appeared rather ordinary.

Biff Wooster, Gunmen managing general partner, owned thirty percent of the club. Wooster's background had been in boxing promotions and management of minor-league hockey and baseball teams. Ten prominent local businessmen owned smaller shares.

The Gunmen's record last year was 10-26. They averaged four thousand fans per game. This season, led by Brank, they were 26-8, with tonight's game against Phoenix and tomorrow's against the powerful Houston Wildcatters remaining in the regular season. Thanks to Lazslo Brank, paid attendance had increased to eighty-five hundred.

Rambaugh noted with interest that ten thousand was considered the break-even point. The cynical senior investigator drove to the Gunmen front office, that statistic uppermost in his mind.

Biff Wooster was short and wiry. Thinning hair and the beginnings of a midsection overhang led

Rambaugh to believe that they were of similar age. His surviving hair was fluffed and styled. He wore tight slacks and sport shirt, cologne with an effective range of five yards, and enough gold jewelry to set off every airport metal detector in the area. Biff Wooster, Rambaugh observed, was entering his middle years under protest.

Wooster gave Rambaugh a knuckle-grinding handshake and asked him to have a seat. "I'll tell you," he said, "this hasn't been one of my better days."

Rambaugh flexed his paw and sat, reminded of pint-sized pitchers who brushed him back and speedy guards who drove around him for the easy basket. "Has it been confirmed that Brank was kidnapped?"

"Don't you read the papers?"

"An overeager newspaper picked wrong in 1948."

"The Boston Braves to win the World Series, you mean?"

"Thomas E. Dewey in another contest."

"Yeah, well, whatever. You don't believe it, you go by Lazslo's condo. They tore it inside out. You're our insurance guy, you're entitled. I think the dicks are still there. I'll call over and okay you to snoop if you like."

"Much appreciated, Mr. Wooster. I will. I am wondering, though, if someone other

than the Mulgorians could be responsible."

"Another ball club? Nah. They probably had fantasies about it like they have fantasies about hopping in the sack with Joan Collins, but most of the owners are millionaire businessmen. They aren't Mafia. It's just a hobby, and they're too polite for that kind of stuff."

"I am told that you own the largest share of the Gunmen."

"Got my life's savings tied up in the team. That's why I'm so sick about this. The other partners, their five to ten percent, it's pin money to them. They bought in so they could brag it up at their clubs that they own a ballclub and so they could hang around the locker room." He paused. "But they're okay. They realize they don't know soccer and sports management from Shinola, so they leave me alone."

"Is there a local Mulgorian community?"

"None to speak of, which made it tough on Lazslo. His English isn't terrific and he got a lot of pressure from groupies and hangers-on. Not your best kind of friends. I did what I could to protect him from those vultures."

"Your regular season ends this week," Rambaugh said.

"Yeah. Tonight it's Phoenix. The Solar Flares are sorry, but

if Lazslo's history, they've got a shot. Our young players really looked to him for leadership. I hope they aren't too demoralized."

"Attendance could suffer."

"Yeah, tell me about it. We were expecting over ten thou. We'll be lucky to get half that now. Houston on Tuesday, that's the killer. They're only a game behind us in the Western Conference. We were looking forward to a sellout. I don't know now. I don't know about the playoffs either. I was figuring that with Brank we'd go all the way. With our record, we'd have the home court advantage and sell out every ball game. We needed that to turn a profit. Speaking of which, I prepared some numbers for you."

Wooster slid a yellow legal pad across his desk to Rambaugh, who studied the figures. The array of numerals and columns was alarming. "Brank earns seven hundred thousand dollars a year?"

"Hey, we didn't get him to take a hike because of our good looks and charm, you know! His contract's guaranteed for five years. The money's in a trust. We don't get it back. It's disbursed to various charities if he can't play. Not to mention the box office nosedive we'll do, which is all there in black and white."

"What charities?"

"Some Mulgorian benevolent societies. In New York and Boston and Philly, they have a lot more Mulgorians than we do. That's where it'll go. Lazslo was a good guy. Maybe it was his loneliness, but he was always thinking of his fellow countrymen."

Rambaugh thanked Wooster for his time and walked out feeling that Lazslo Brank was indeed a good fellow. He wasn't so sure about his employers.

Brank lived in a luxury condominium complex that overlooked Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. There were scores of units in two buildings. Though the complex was walled and fenced, it had no security gate. Brank's recent comings and goings, therefore, were not recorded, and Rambaugh had not read of an eyewitness account.

"Nobody saw anything," a detective named Garrison told him as two other officers applied fingerprint powder and searched for evidence. "Nobody saw Brank come home, nobody saw any visitors, nobody saw anybody leave."

Garrison was in his fifties. He wore a wrinkled brown suit and a fatigued expression that could have been a decal. "Or

heard?" Rambaugh asked him.

"Or heard."

Rambaugh nodded and looked at overturned furniture and personal belongings that had been flung every which way. "I have investigated more residential burglaries than I care to recall. This has the earmark of juveniles or junkies, not a secret police kidnapping operation."

"My thinking too," Garrison said. "And funny how all this chaos was done so quietly. Six-digit price tags or not, these condos haven't got the world's thickest walls. It should've sounded like World War Three to the neighbors."

"Any sign of a struggle? Blood or hair or other tissue?"

"That's what my guy with the tweezers is trying to find. We've been at it for over twelve hours. Zilch."

"Who actually reported Brank's disappearance?"

"Biff Wooster did. He came over around eleven, couldn't get an answer, and had the manager open the door."

"What is your impression of Mr. Wooster?" Rambaugh asked.

Detective Garrison smiled. "Back when I was in uniform, I was vice president of our police officers' guild. Biff was G.M. of the hockey club. I was in charge of buying blocks of tickets for games. He was all right,

I guess. He gave us a nice discount, but there was always some little thing not quite right, you know. Like the seats weren't quite as good as he promised. Or he'd try to kick in a few extra tickets we didn't need. Nickel-dime stuff, but it was a pain in the rear."

"You would not, then, buy a used car from the man?"

Garrison laughed and checked his watch. "No comment. Wooster's not a serious suspect, if that's what you mean. I have to cut this short, Rambaugh. Some paper pushers from the State Department are due shortly. They're bringing FBI agents with them. It's gonna be a fun day."

"The Mulgorian Research Bureau, evidently, *is* seriously suspected."

"Spies are the Feds' territory," Garrison said flatly. "If they want to play cloak-and-dagger with the taxpayers' money, I don't care."

"You are obviously dubious. What is your theory?"

"I don't have a theory. I deal with facts, which I don't have many of. C'mon, I'll show you something. Draw your own conclusions."

Garrison took Rambaugh into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. "We haven't an inventory of Brank's stuff, so we don't know what's miss-

ing, but look in there and tell me what you think. If you catch my drift, keep it to yourself."

Rambaugh studied the contents of the cabinet and said, "No toothbrush. No razor."

"Good boy," Garrison said. "I timed you. Thirty-four seconds. I'll bet a month's pay the Feds never notice and that's fine with me. If we're talking nonpolitical hanky panky here, that's *my* territory."

Frank Rambaugh was a widower. He lived in a three-bedroom suburban ranch house with his son, Richie, a high school senior. Debra, his daughter, was away at college, so the Rambaugh men, father and son, were in effect bachelor roommates, an arrangement with predictable housekeeping and cooking results.

Rambaugh was an acceptable cook on weekends, when he had the time to prepare roasts and casseroles. Hurried weeknight dinners invited disaster. Hoping for efficiency and at least marginal palatability, he purchased a microwave oven.

It hadn't worked out. Foods prepared in it either became soggy and gray or exploded. TV dinners in metal trays produced miniature electrical storms. Those cocooned in "microwaveable" plastic were lim-

ited in variety and quality.

Monday through Friday dinners, thus, evolved to take-out. Rambaugh arrived that evening with chicken, biscuits, and cole slaw. Richie was attempting to cut the front yard, but thanks to the boy's procrastination on the chore and the lush growth of grass in Seattle's warm, damp spring, progress was slight.

Rambaugh watched as Richie took a run at a clump, mulched a square yard or so, and muttered an obscenity as the machine sputtered and died.

"Dad, let's eat. I can finish later."

"Later meaning August, when it's double-canopy jungle? You are doing last week's mowing, son, and I am enjoying your penance."

"Dad!"

Rambaugh, a softy whose stomach was growling, gave in. "Very well. After dinner."

"Did you hear about Lazslo Brank?" Richie asked. "The communists made him go home."

"I heard," Rambaugh said glumly.

"Me and Danny Porter had tickets for the game tonight with Phoenix. With Brank playing, we'd kill them. Danny had his dad's car and everything, but now he doesn't want to go."

"Danny and I," Rambaugh corrected, before explaining his and Mother Unity's involvement in the matter.

"Wow! Do you believe what they're saying on the news? That cop you talked to, he doesn't seem to."

"Speaking of the news," Rambaugh said, ripping the lid from the chicken bucket, "it is that time. Shall we dine with the hotcombed smilers and hope for an optimistic update?"

"You talk funnier than usual when you're upset, Dad. I'll bring the TV trays."

The local news people reported no developments in the case. Detective Garrison's medicine cabinet revelation was not mentioned. A spokesman from the State Department and another from the Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted a press conference. Both stated that everything possible was being done. The airport was being watched and law enforcement agencies throughout the Pacific Northwest were on the lookout for Lazslo Brank. An official protest had been lodged through a neutral country to the People's Socialist Republic of Mulgoria.

"Maybe the President'll call in an air strike on Mulgoria," Richie said. "It'd serve 'em right."

"The slaughter of innocent

Mulgorians will not bring back Lazslo Brank. Nor will it save Mother Unity millions."

"Hey, Dad, I got the tickets. Want to go?"

Rambaugh was on his seventh piece of chicken. Suddenly, yes, he did want to go. Leverage first, however. "If the lawn is completed before. I will even buy popcorn, soft drinks, and a program."

Richie pulled himself up from the couch. Slowly. "Dad, that ain't fair."

"That *isn't* fair, son."

The Rambaughs arrived five minutes before kick-off, but the coliseum looked as if they had shown up an hour early.

"Danny Porter and ten thousand others appear to be disguised as empty seats," Rambaugh said, counting the house.

"We've got thirty-eight hundred so far," Biff Wooster said as he sat down beside the senior investigator. "With this crowd, you were easy to spot."

"Hopefully, interest in the squad will resume with the upcoming playoffs," Rambaugh said.

"Not enough. Brank's the main man. Fans come to see him. Now that he's been kidnapped—"

"Allegedly kidnapped," Rambaugh interrupted.

"What are you trying to say, Rambaugh?"

"Merely that our only concrete information is the fact that Mr. Brank is not presently on the plastic turf, warming up with his teammates."

"Regardless, Unity's paying my loss. I read the policy cover to cover. I know my rights."

"Which include indemnification if and when a loss is proved, providing said loss is not the result of fraud."

"What are you trying to say, Rambaugh?"

"Nothing specific, I assure you. I simply quoted a clause in the policy you so thoroughly read."

Biff Wooster stood and jabbed a finger at him, saying, "Don't play games with me, pal. I know a lot of people in this town."

After Wooster stormed off, Richie said, "Dad, Mr. Oakes's nose is gonna be out of joint on account of you calling a customer a crook again."

The referee blew his whistle and the teams lined up for the game's start. "Never mind, son. Just narrate for me so I will have an idea what is transpiring."

Richie did, relating how outdoor professional soccer never caught on in this country. While a hundred thousand fans in England or Brazil might scream

themselves hoarse in a 0-0 tie and riot afterward for the fun of it, American spectators demanded faster action and more numbers on the scoreboard.

Indoor soccer—rug hockey, as Richie termed it—provided that. Typical scores were 7-4, 11-2, 7-6. Six men to a side. End to end action. The ball whistling off heads and toes, caroming wildly off the boards. Heavy collisions in front of the net. Besieged goalkeepers.

The nuances of the game were simple for Rambaugh to follow. Strive for mismatches near your opponent's goal. Protect against breakaways in the other direction. He was actually enjoying the match, everything but the score, that is.

The Phoenix Solar Flares, a woebegone group with only eleven victories all season, led 4-1 at halftime. Many fans did not return to their seats for the beginning of the second stanza. It seemed to Rambaugh that the Gunmen were disorganized and dispirited without their leader. They chased the ball in bunches, leaving enemy wingers open for easy goals. Their own scoring efforts were lackluster and rarely did a rebound bounce their way for another opportunity.

The second half offered scant improvement. The coliseum sounded like a library, the si-

lence broken only by booing and a chorus of moans when the p.a. system announced Houston's 9-3 win over Kansas City. The game ended, 8-5 Phoenix. The Wildcatters were now tied with the Gunmen, Richie told his father. Tomorrow night's game would decide first place in the conference and determine playoff seeding.

Rambaugh and son filed out, members of a funeral procession. A superfan ahead of them, resplendent in Gunmen T-shirt, crossed pistols logo and all, cursed loudly as he tore up his tickets to the Houston game.

Rambaugh didn't know what to do next, but he had seen in the game program a listing of Gunmen owners. He knew one of them: Tomorrow he would pay the man a visit. To what purpose, he didn't know. But at least he was doing *something*.

The Rambaughs ate a breakfast of Froot Loops and leftover chicken as they watched the seven A.M. news. The lead story concerned a Mulgorian citizen named Boris Falka. He had been arrested in downtown Seattle last night. On his person was a forged passport. In the trunk of his rented car was a large quantity of cash. Further details were unavailable, but a connection to the disappear-

ance of Lazslo Brank was strongly suspected.

The phone rang. Richie answered it and handed the receiver to his father. "Guess who."

"Frank, Biff Wooster just called me at home," David Oakes said. "He says he's going to sue us for slander and malfeasance if we don't deliver a check to him immediately. He said he wants seventy-five thousand for reduced attendance at last night's game and that it's only the beginning. Then he hung up on me. What do you know about this?"

"The man is obviously distraught. I reminded him of a clause in his policy and he misinterpreted it as a personal affront."

"The fraud clause, Frank?"

"David, I will be in touch." Rambaugh hung up and dialed police headquarters. Detective Garrison was in.

"Boris Falka was busted by Traffic, Rambaugh. In Mulgoria you drive on the backassward side of the road, like they do in England. He must've forgot himself. He turned a corner into oncoming traffic and a blue-and-white was right there. They say the MRB is Mickey Mouse. I guess this proves it."

"Falka is a Mulgorian Research Bureau operative?"

"The Feds scooped him up mucho pronto, so I don't know

much more than you do, but he was holding a fake Yugoslavian passport and there was a million bucks' worth of fifties and hundreds in a suitcase in his trunk. If Falka's confessed, nobody's told me yet."

"A million dollar payoff for Lazslo Brank, I presume?"

"Looks like it. The Feds are checking every Mulgorian in town. There aren't many of them and one's probably got Brank. Kind of shoots down our hunch on Biff Wooster, doesn't it?"

Rambaugh said nothing.

"Don't take it so hard. Win a few, lose a few. I'll keep you posted."

Rambaugh sat down, looked at his breakfast, and put it aside.

Richie came in from the kitchen, where he had been listening on an extension. "Dad, how come you hate it so much when you're wrong?"

"Because I never am."

Father and son looked at each other and laughed.

Darwin Meade, president of Meade and Company, a major CPA firm, was a Unity Property and Casualty policyholder. Last year, Rambaugh had investigated an employee dishonesty claim. An accountant of Meade's had been creating fic-

titious accounts-payable for corporate clients. The transactions had been so deftly laundered through computers that Meade was only able to narrow it down to six people. Rambaugh did the outside legwork. The guilty party would be hoeing potatoes on an honor farm for years. Meade had been grateful and still was.

Darwin Meade owned five percent of the Gunmen.

"Lazslo is like a son to me and the other partners, Frank. I trust that the arrest of this Mulgorian agent will bring him back to us soon and unharmed."

Meade was softspoken and reserved, to Rambaugh the archetypical bookkeeper.

"Likewise, Darwin. Even if this had not happened, would the Gunmen have turned a profit?"

"Possibly, if we progressed through the playoff rounds and won the championship and if every playoff series went the maximum number of games and the coliseum filled to ninety percent of capacity for each."

"Realistically?"

"I'd be figuratively dancing in the streets if we broke even."

"Why, Darwin, do grown men who have made handsome incomes through hard work and efficient business sense buy a team and flush money down a figurative toilet?"

Meade chuckled. "The cost of

a share was relatively modest. Majority ownership would be a different story. Some fellows my age take a flier on a yacht or a mistress. My toy is one-twentieth of an indoor soccer team."

"You're safe, but Biff Wooster isn't."

"Biff's contract with us protects him from liability on excessive losses but, yes, most of his assets are tied up in the Gunmen. I just got off the phone with him, as a matter of fact. He is very unhappy with you, Frank."

"He was complaining about me?"

"Considering that he doubtlessly contacted the other partners, too, lobbying is more accurate."

"Are you happy with him, Darwin?"

"He was instrumental in acquiring Lazslo. It was a financial risk he felt necessary to make the Gunmen a winner. His judgment in that regard has been correct. We needed an individual experienced in sports management. Biff was available."

"In other areas?"

"Day-to-day expenses are higher than we anticipated. Biff claims that we have to go first class if we are to be credible. He likes to take people to lunch. He has a Mercedes as a company car. Those incidentals add up."

"What do you know of the Mulgorians that I may not?"

"We did our homework before we sent Biff to Vienna for Lazslo. They're a xenophobic nation. Their government is at odds with anyone noncommunist and they even quarrel with the Soviets. Five or so years ago, they warmed slightly. The ruler was a trained economist. He recognized the necessity of bringing hard currency in and made overtures to the West. He tried to establish tourism. It didn't succeed and the dictator was purged."

"A tourism campaign in the United States?" Rambaugh asked.

Meade went to a filing cabinet and found a folder. "I still have the brochures. They hired a New York ad agency. Blenheim and Doan. An advertising giant. They have offices everywhere."

Rambaugh thanked Meade for his time.

"Are you going to pay us, Frank?"

"I'd prefer to resolve the problem."

"As you did for us?"

"Indeed."

"Me too, but good luck selling Biff on that approach."

heim and Doan's Seattle branch.

"Sure, I remember the Mulgorian account. We were rolling, lifting off the runway, tucking in the landing gear, when they switched gears and sent Premier Glouchev into the boonies and made him Minister of Hydroelectric Power or some such. The new honchos stuck their heads back in the sand. Fifty people in the New York office went bye-bye. It was a big account. B and D, henceforth, said thanks-but-no-thanks to Bolshevik business. Good ol' American capitalists and their ad budget flip-flops have us all mainlining Maalox. We don't need more aggravation from Marxists who don't click with the kind of persuasion we sell anyhow."

Kenny Tucker was natty and pinstriped, a tanning-parlor tanned post-Yuppie with satchels under his eyes. Rambaugh marveled at the man's ability to speak entire paragraphs between breaths. "How did the campaign work before it was cancelled?"

"Not worth a diddly. B and D shipped a team to Mulgoria that'd make *National Geographic* drool. We did some of the niftiest four-color brochures you ever laid your bloodshots on. No go. The bottom line was, who wants to go some place where there's nothing to do but tour collective farms while your

R. Kendall (Known To My Friends. As Kenny) Tucker was in charge of Blen-

hotel room's being searched and bugged by the MRB? If they hadn't made Glouchev walk the plank, we would've asked them to do so in triplicate. We didn't get paid for over half our billings."

"If your company promoted Mulgorian travel, it logically follows that domestic travel agencies were also hired."

"They were. Not a national outfit. Local independents. That was an additional glitch. They didn't use pros in most cases. They used Mulgorians in other businesses. Glouchev, the poor demented slob, his plan was to keep it in the family, as it were. If the Mulgorians who came here to escape tyranny at home could rub a couple of shekels together thanks to the new regime, maybe they'd quit saying awful things about concentration camps and grain rationing and whatnot." Tucker snapped his fingers. "Who was their Seattle guy? I'm thinking. I know they had one. It'll come to me. I was transferred here around then. Got it! Ziggy something. Yeah, Zbigniew Alhia. There wasn't an embassy or consulate those days either, so Ziggy was sort of an acting trade rep. He ran an import business. Far as I know, he's still alive and kicking. Say, that insurance company you work for, how's your image? You could do worse than

turn yourselves over to B and D for a facelift."

Rambaugh said thanks-but-no-thanks, left, and located Alhia Imports in the Yellow Pages. He tried the number and was informed by a recording that it was temporarily out of service. He drove to the address, a wing of a warehouse in the industrial district.

The building was old and grimy. Paint on the outside was peeling in large slabs, as if oxidized parchment. Soot and dust permitted virtually no light to enter the showroom windows. On the door was a CLOSED FOR REMODELING sign.

Rambaugh wiped a spot on the glass and peered inside. Articles of merchandise appeared to be displayed on walls and in cabinets, but it was too dark to identify them. No lumber, paint, or anything else associated with remodeling was visible. He thought he saw a narrow crack of light in a corridor behind the showroom, though it could have been just a reflection. He went around to the alley. Above a loading platform was an overhead door with a single small pane of glass.

Rambaugh squinted through it and distinguished an equally dim light. He rapped on the door and saw for an instant a silhouette. A silhouette that moved.

He hurried to a telephone booth and called Garrison.

"Stop hyperventilating, Rambaugh, and repeat what you said."

Rambaugh did, also briefing the detective on his conversations with Meade and Tucker.

"I scrounged a copy of the Feds' Mulgorian list. There's no Zbigniew or Ziggy Alhia on it."

"Please check again."

"Okay. Give me your number and stand by. I got a buddy who works at Department of Immigration."

Garrison phoned back ten minutes later. "Guess what? Alhia's not on the list because he's naturalized. He took the oath about four years ago. Maybe I better come on over."

"Indeed. And please bring a search warrant with you."

Garrison met Rambaugh at the loading dock inside fifteen minutes.

"You are remarkably prompt. How did you persuade a judge to sign a warrant in such a short length of time?"

Garrison unlocked his trunk and withdrew the biggest crowbar Rambaugh had ever seen. "No judge is gonna green-light me to break and enter because some insurance guy thought he saw something."

"It was upright and human," Rambaugh said indignantly.

"At last count, this planet has damn near five billion humans and only one's Lazslo Brank. Us and the Feds are coming up empty, so I'll give this a shot. What I'm doing here is responding to a citizen who reported a possible burglary in an unoccupied building, right?"

"Good Lord!"

"Stand aside." Garrison jammed the bar into the door sash adjacent to the latch and pulled. Unseen metal groaned, then popped. Garrison raised the door and asked, "Which direction was the burglar moving?"

Rambaugh replied by walking in to the first door on the left. "Shall I kick it in? And why, please, is your weapon not drawn?"

"Sneak thieves and soccer stars generally aren't shooters. You want we should do even more property damage?"

Rambaugh turned the knob, swung it open with a black wingtip, and stepped aside. The room was a spacious office equipped with a bunk, refrigerator, and hotplate. It was illuminated by a soap opera. The detective and the senior investigator blinked, adjusting their eyes to the eerie glow of the television. A man was crouched in a fetal position behind a desk. Pizza boxes, Styrofoam hamburger containers, and

empty beer cans littered the carpet.

Lazslo Brank pleaded loudly in a foreign language.

"We are not MRB," Rambaugh said. "Do not be frightened."

"You speak Mulgorian?" Garrison asked him.

"Scared To Death is a universal tongue," Rambaugh said. "Lazslo, why are you here?"

"I have to. MRB. They send assassins. My friend, he get poop on plot, hide me out."

"Bat guano," Rambaugh said, noticing that Brank's sideburns were gone and that his long hair was crewcut length and dyed blond.

"They say they do worse than that if I no go home to lead national team to glorious victories. I supposed to go today but Ziggy no show."

Garrison had Brank settled in a chair, sipping a cold beer. "Therapy. It'll calm him."

"Your friend, Zbigniew?" Rambaugh asked.

"MRB come. He know."

Rambaugh took the beer from him. "No plot. No MRB. Zbigniew. Your alleged friend. He was selling you to an intermediary who, upon payment of vast sums of money, was contracted to send you to Mulgoria. You can drink all you wish later."

Brank looked at him.

Garrison said, "Put a lid on all the syllables, Rambaugh. Hell, I hardly understand you."

"No assassins, Lazslo. No Mulgoria."

"You no MRB?" he said, trembling.

"No MRB. Houston game tonight. Okay?"

"Okay!" Brank said, smashing a fist against a palm. "Gunmen wipe Houston out."

"Wait a minute, Rambaugh," Garrison said. "He's going downtown. I stand to ring up a fair amount of brownie points on this. While the Feds are spinning their wheels—"

"Lazslo, have you seen Biff Wooster since Mr. Alhia brought you here?"

Garrison shook his head. "Same song, different verse."

"No. No Mr. Wooster."

"There you are," Garrison said.

"I no see Mr. Wooster since me and Zbigniew, we scam my pad. Mr. Biff, he in his car in parking lot. See us. He wave at me, don't do nothing. Him and Zbigniew, they pals too, I think."

Garrison looked at Rambaugh. "What's your deal?"

"The collar or whatever you people call it is yours."

"Fine."

"On a delayed basis."

"Why?"

"To avoid breaking a teen-aged boy's heart."

They sat in the owners' section, theater-type seats at midfield, fifteen rows up. Frank and Richie Rambaugh were there. Darwin Meade, whose seats they were, was there. Detective Garrison was there, too. It struck Rambaugh that he and Richie were in a hot dog eating competition, getting along famously.

Lazslo Brank was also there, but he was on the field where he belonged. And thanks to him, the match was fairly well decided by halftime. With a capacity crowd cheering him and the Gunmen on, and the Houston Wildcatters deflated by the unexpected presence of a soccer legend, it was a blowout.

Brank played as if possessed. If he wasn't making an end-to-end rush, he was parked in the sweet spot in front of the enemy net, taking service from his inspired teammates. Rambaugh marveled that the enemy defenders couldn't dislodge him with a forklift. The ball stuck to Brank's toe as if magnetized, then burst into the goal like a bullet. At the halftime whis-

tle, the Gunmen were up 6-0.

Richie and Garrison retired for more food. Rambaugh asked where the managing general partner was.

"Biff came in and saw Lazslo warming up," Darwin Meade said. "If you'd have been there, you'd have thought he swallowed lye. I fired him."

"He did not orchestrate the kidnapping, Darwin. He allowed it to occur, though. He was concerned, surely, about Brank's absence. He went to his home and saw him leaving with Alhia and did nothing. He may have speculated, he may have known of the Mulgorian's intense interest. Whichever, he kept the information to himself and took advantage."

"Has your detective friend caught Alhia yet?"

"No. If he isn't already enroute to Mulgoria, he will."

"What will you do with Biff?"

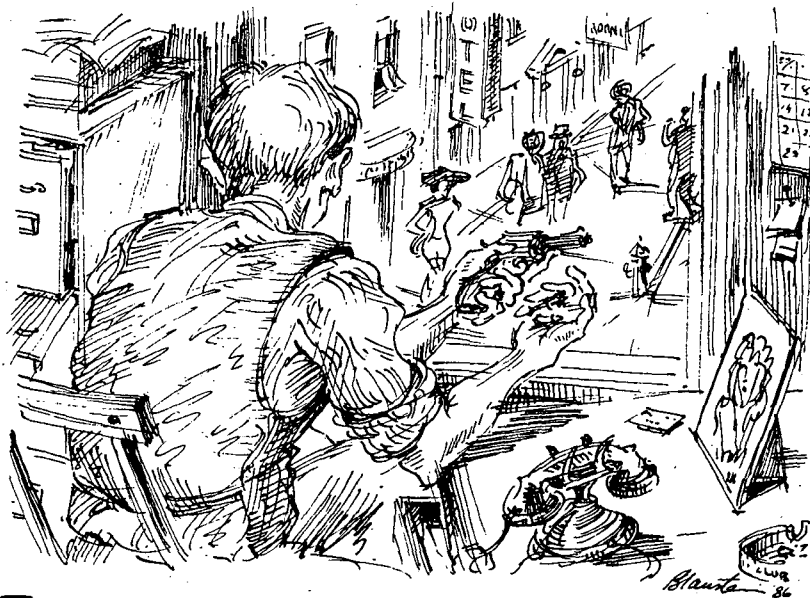
"If he withdraws his claim, Mother Unity and I are out of the picture."

"If he doesn't?"

"He will wish he were in Mulgoria."

Too Broke For Bullets

by Lance A. Holley



It was night. Darkness covered the city like scum covers a pond. From my office window I could see the hotel where the ladies for hire were working their magic on what seemed to be an endless line of eager johns. The hotel's neon sign was flashing its name in a perfect match for my

mood . . . dirty and blue. I was cleaning my gun. I don't know why, I hadn't used it in months. Even if I'd needed it, which I hadn't, I was too broke to buy bullets. I guess it gave me something to do while waiting for the finance company to come and repossess it. I loaded the one bullet I had left and looked

back on the day. I guess the best thing you could say about it was that it sucked.

"Mr. Noggin? Brick Noggin?"

The voice was soft and seductive and came from somewhere behind me. In the movies this is where the detective whirls his chair around and comes face to face with a blonde, blue-eyed bundle of trouble with legs long enough to reach down into a man's soul and kick it in the groin. But this wasn't the movies and folding chairs don't whirl so I stood up and did a neat pivot instead.

Seems the movies were wrong about the last part, too. Oh, the babe was fabulous all right, and dressed like she had a million bucks, but her hair was red. So were her eyes, but I could see they were meant to be green. "Been cryin', Toots?" As I asked, I flashed her my best hard-boiled smile.

"Why, yes," she said, "and how did you know my name was Toots?"

"It's just a way I have with dames. And with those red tresses and emerald eyes I just bet I can guess your last name, too. Lemme see, now, O'Rourke? O'Connor? Flannigan?"

"Feldman," she said with a slight snuffle.

Well, I told you the day sucked. "So, Miss... uh... Toots, what's a nice kid

like you doing in a dump like this?" That's the kind of stuff you say when you're known as a snappy conversationalist.

"Mr. Noggin, it's my husband, Phil. He's been missing for a week now, and I'm afraid... well... you know, that he might be hurt or something."

"Call me Brick, Toots," I said as I motioned for her to sit down.

"Thanks, Brick Toots," she said and sat down. Suddenly, the hardness of the floor met the firmness of her shapely assets. I had forgotten that my folding chair was the only seat in the room. Apologizing, I offered it to her and parked my worn-out carcass on the edge of the desk where the message spike was: I remember thinking then that it was a good thing I had hocked the message spike last week or right now both of us would be rubbing sore keisters.

"I'm just Brick, period. But why come to me? The cops just about got the market cornered on missing husbands."

She reached into her purse and pulled out two crisp, new hundred dollar bills. "Let's just say that there are certain reasons the police don't need to be involved. That's why I came to you, Brick Period."

I was getting the message that this skirt wasn't exactly

summa cum laude. Still, those two C-notes had me ignoring the red-flag danger signals that were hitting me in the back of my skull. I needed that dough to keep my gun and besides, I was used to things a whole lot worse than red flags hitting me in the back of my skull.

I pocketed the money and slid off the desk. "Tell you what, Toots," I said. "Let's both of us go get some shut-eye and first thing in the morning I'll start looking for this husband of yours, good old Whatsisname."

"Phil," she said.

"Yeah, Phil," I echoed, gracefully slipping my arm around her shoulder and escorting her toward the door. I had just finished mentally complimenting myself on what a smooth guy I was when I was conked on the cabeza by something a lot harder than those red flags I wished I hadn't ignored.

When I came to, my head was spinning. Actually, my whole body was spinning. I was in a dark room, handcuffed to a brown and purple spotted wooden pony on the merry-go-round at the old, abandoned amusement park warehouse on the other side of town. My head was throbbing and my vision was a little blurred from the shellacking my skull had taken,

but even in the dim light I could see Toots had the drop on me, guarding me with my own gun. I found myself wishing the finance company had come to get it yesterday.

"So, Toots," I said. "I guess this really isn't the best possible time to ask you to dinner?" It's hard to make really snappy conversation when you're handcuffed to a brown and purple spotted wooden pony.

"Can it, gumshoe," she said with the easy glibness that comes from not being handcuffed to a brown and purple spotted wooden pony, "and you might stay alive long enough to meet Forklift Phil, the guy you were 'hired' to find."

Forklift Phil! If I hadn't been so glued to the games of little Miss Rambo over there, I might've suspected something like this. Forklift Phil was the most notorious hood in the city. He had his stubby little fingers into everything: gambling, girls, grass, and about fifteen other things that started with the letter "g." The police had been trying to nab him for years, but so far he had managed to stay beyond the reach of the long arm of the law. I came close to nailing him once, with that little incident in the ladies' room of the Regency Hotel. But that's another story. Let's just say he'd had it in for me ever since.

As I sat there in the almost dark, there was one thing that kept digging at me and wouldn't let up. The saddle horn on this brown and purple spotted wooden pony. Oh, and there was one other thing, too. Why was I still alive, and how was Forklift Phil going to dispose of the soon-to-be-late Brick Noggin? Okay, so that's two other things. I had a little trouble in third grade math.

I saw a pudgy hand reach under the pony's right foreleg. Suddenly the room stopped spinning. Actually, the merry-go-round stopped spinning. From my point of view the room still spun a little. Merry-go-rounds always did make me dizzy. A large, bulky figure unlocked the cuffs and a gruff monotonous voice grunted for me to dismount my sturdy steed.

The Voice walked itself over to the fuse box and threw the main switch, instantly bathing the room in light. I was blinking like mad from the sudden onslaught of light and was face to face with a huge man in a navy blue suit. His hair was dark and curly and his eyes glinted in a way that was both tender and treacherous. Either this was Forklift Phil himself or somebody had given the handcuff keys to Raymond Burr as Perry Mason.

Toots still had my gun and

still had me covered. "Hello, Mr. Noggin," Phil wheezed, "and please keep your hands where I can see them. You will forgive me if my associate, Della, keeps you covered?"

I looked quizzically at Toots. "I thought your name was Toots," I said.

"It is," she replied. "It's just that sometimes Phil here thinks he's Raymond Burr as Perry Mason."

"Quiet, doll," barked Phil. "Mr. Noggin is probably wondering the reason for this . . . elaborate charade."

"Yeah," I rasped with what I hoped was fierce intensity, "I never was very good at charades. Oh, and call me Brick, pond scum."

"All right," he smiled menacingly, "have it your way . . . Brick Pond Scum." Right away I could tell these two were meant for each other. "I knew the best way to get your attention was by using money and a beautiful woman. As for why you're here, well, it's because you're going to kill me. By the way, you should see a doctor about that raspy problem with your voice."

I mean I *knew* I flunked third grade math six times, but somehow something didn't add up. "Right," I said. "It isn't that I wouldn't like to oblige, Fatso, but the bimbo over there seems

to have my gat." I loved it when I talked like that.

Forklift Phil looked puzzled. "What's the matter? You flunk third grade math six times or something? The cops are gettin' close to me, closer than they ever got before. That means I gotta liquidate my assets, pack up my doll, and disappear. And the cops, they won't be tryin' nearly so hard to find me if I turn up dead, shot by person or persons unknown. And since I'm not really ready to die, I need a body. That, my unfortunate gumshoe friend, is you!"

My mind was racing. Great. Just what I needed, still being woozy from that little merry-go-round-up on Spot the Wonderhorse. I cleared my head and started to think.

"Phil," I said, "you gotta outweigh me by about, what . . . three hundred pounds? What's gonna make the police think this underfed but soon-to-be-bullet-ridden corpse is you?"

"Very simple, my friend," said Phil as he moved toward a rectangular lump covered by a printed bedsheet, "I'm going to make you eat this!" He whipped the sheet off the rectangle and stared at me defiantly.

"A stuffed gorilla in a cage?" I asked, a little confused.

"Wrong sheet," he apologized sheepishly. He cleared his throat and moved on to another bed-

sheet-covered rectangle. "This!" he announced, and uncovered the entire three-section dessert freezer from the crosstown A & P. "How about a little cheesecake, Mr. Brick Noggin?"

I knew it was time to make my move. I still had my hands up as I slowly positioned myself closer to my old friend the brown and purple spotted wooden pony. "Cheesecake," I laughed, "hah! I don't take my clothes off for just anybody, dirtbag!" As I yelled, I leaped sideways and flung myself behind the pony, finding the switch just below the right foreleg.

As the merry-go-round roared to life, its path carried me to the fuse box. I threw myself at the main switch, immediately plunging the room into darkness. The blackness was pierced momentarily by the flash from my gun, expelling the only bullet I knew Toots would fire.

"Fire again, you idiot!" Phil's gruff voice betrayed his location. Next to him, on the left, I heard one click, then another, and the seductive tones of Toots, saying: "I can't, Phil, it's empty!" I never thought I'd be glad I was too broke for bullets. I made a mental note to send a thank you card to my creditors as I closed my eyes, turned on the main switch, and lunged at the spot where I heard the voices. I hoped I'd figured right.

I had. As the lights came on, the sudden brightness made them blink as it had made me blink earlier. I felt myself landing on Toots, on a soft spot that I'd like to check out in more detail later. I opened my eyes in time to see our momentum propel us into Phil, who was fatally knocked into the three-section dessert freezer from the crosstown A & P. It was his weight more than our momentum that sent him shattering through the glass doors. The broken glass did things to his arteries his high-fat, low-fiber diet never dreamed of. He died as he lived, in the arms of Sara Lee.

I took the cuffs off the merry-go-round and used them on Toots Feldman. I also took some change from her purse and called the cops; all I had on me was her two hundreds. As we waited for the boys in blue to arrive, she looked longingly into my eyes.

"Can't we go somewhere quiet and be . . . you know . . . together?" she purred, her voice as soft as that spot I mentioned earlier.

By now I was immune to dames like her and all the trouble they caused. I had finally learned my lesson.

"Yeah," I answered cynically, "call me when you're back in

town . . . in about twenty years."

I was wondering where I could become a monk when I saw the flashing blue lights of city police car 24. My old friend Bill Walters jumped out.

He saw that my little package for him was female and he flashed me that big Bill Walters smile. "I'll bet this means you've sworn off women again, Brick." Walters was the kind of guy I liked, the kind that wouldn't be taken in by a good-looking pair of legs and innocent but somehow knowing green eyes.

"Yeah," I said. "And Forklift Phil's inside. No need to hurry, though. He's not going anywhere. Not any more."

The usually unflappable Bill Walters shook his head in amazement. "Forklift Phil, huh? You'll probably get a medal for that one, Brick. Tell you what. Why don't you let me wait here for the back-up and the coroner. You can ride into the precinct with my new partner Sandy to give your statement."

I thought I saw a trace of amusement on Bill's face. As I wondered what the deal was, I asked: "Sandy, huh? Where's McCloskey?"

"Vacation. Back next week."

There was that funny look again. I made a mental note to ask him about that later, after I got some sleep.

Sandy was in the driver's seat as I stumbled into the squad car. "Let's go get this over with, Sandy," I said. "I'm past due for some shut-eye."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Noggin. Hey, how did you know my name was Sandy?"

The voice nailed me to the seat. I looked for the driver and instead discovered a pair of legs so long they could reach right down into a man's soul and kick it in the groin. Suddenly, I felt

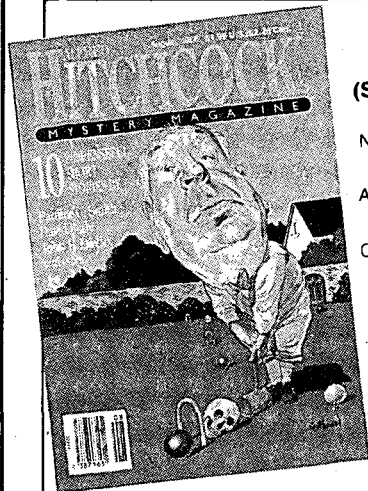
much better. "It's just a way I have with dames," I said. "And I bet I can guess your last name, too. Lemme see. O'Rourke? O'Connor? Feldman?"

"Smith, Mr. Noggin. Sandy Smith."

"Nice name," I said. "And you can call me Brick, dollface."

"Okay, Brick Dollface," she said. As we headed off toward the precinct, somehow I knew that Sandy Smith would be my kind of woman.

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The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

House By The Road

by Janet
O'Daniel

“**T**he night grew darker and a wind was rising as the storm howled around him. Trees bent and branches reached out toward him as he struggled forward along the lonely road. Suddenly a light shone out from a solitary house far ahead . . .”

Irene put down the typed sheet. “Classic beginning, all right. Is it a spoof?”

Jane smiled. “I guess so. In a way. And I really haven’t decided where to go with it. Want some more sherry?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t—” Irene held out her glass. She had kicked off her shoes and was letting the fire warm her feet. “But why do it?”

“It’s the irresistible first paragraph, isn’t it? You just have to keep reading.”

Irene yawned comfortably and

sipped her sherry. "I'll take your word for it. You know about these things. Look, are you happy with the house? It's darling—I mean, I love what you've done with it, but somehow when you first told me you were buying it, I didn't think—you know—that you'd be moving in alone."

Neither did I, thought Jane, looking around at the room, its simple white curtains, its blue and white homespun covers, its old fireplace. There was a copper pot for firewood, there were blue African violets in pots on the deep windowsills. A braided rug. She tried to see it with an impartial eye. Was it all too cute, too homey? Totally unsuitable for today—and for a man? A foolish affectation of simplicity and nostalgia? But he had never seen the house. That was not why—She heard again in memory the angry words, the slamming door.

"Is it something that's over?" Irene asked cautiously.

"Yes, it's over. He's gone to England for the summer."

"Well, possibly when he comes back—"

"No," Jane said shortly. "Not when he comes back either."

Irene asked no more questions and they went on talking, at ease with an old friendship, about times remembered, about the college where they both taught, about the summer that

stretched ahead, neither of them probing deep where pain might hide.

"We'll be at the Cape for a few weeks. Come and visit," Irene begged.

"Too much to do here. I haven't even started on the yard and garden. It's a terrible tangle. And I plan to do a lot of writing."

"Sounds daunting."

"Well, a little. Which brings me to a problem. Do you know of somebody I can get to help—around the house, I mean?"

Irene frowned, concentrating on the problem.

"I'll put out feelers. Is there just a drop more of that sherry?"

Was it important, Jane wondered, that you like someone who worked for you? Because at first meeting she didn't much take to Flora Hammel, a shapeless, dough-faced woman in green polyester pants, her short gray hair standing out stiffly. She was what Jane thought of as a watcher. Her eyes slid narrowly around the room as they talked, taking in everything—curtains, furniture, Jane herself. Jane realized she had hoped for someone warmer, friendlier, perhaps a bit more reassuring. Still—

"I expect to be writing every morning in my room upstairs,"

she explained. "It's not a large house and there won't be a great deal for you to do. I was thinking perhaps two days a week? Then in the afternoons I'd like to work on the garden. I'll probably need a man to help with that. The place has been badly neglected for a long time. I don't suppose you know of anybody who does yard work?"

"Why do you need a man?"

"Why—no reason. I just thought—"

"Do it myself."

"It's fairly heavy work, some of it. Brush clearing, and I see a lot of brambles. Some dead wood that could be cut up for the fireplace—things like that. And I want to start a small garden of my own."

"I could give you a hand. Got all the tools, too. But suit yourself. A man would want more money," Flora said pointedly.

"Well, there is that." Jane gave a nervous little laugh because she could not quite picture herself working alongside Flora Hammel. She felt curiously trapped. "Suppose we give it a try then," she said weakly.

"Up to you," Flora said. Then she paused. "Writing what?"

"Mysteries. I write mysteries."

"Know a lot about that, do you?"

A lot about what? Jane wondered. Death, deduction, violence, evil?

"I teach English at the college," she said vaguely.

For the first time since she had entered the house, Flora Hammel's mouth twitched at the corners with something that looked faintly like amusement. "When do you want me to start?" she asked.

They decided on two days a week. Mornings Flora would work in the house; afternoons would be for outdoors. She was always prompt, driving up in an ancient blue Dodge, its fenders well corroded. She whipped through the house with her dusting, polishing, scrubbing, never making too much of it. The place was always immaculate by noon. Then in the afternoon the two of them would go out and work at clearing brambles and dead wood, trimming branches, routing last autumn's leaves which had never been raked. The little house, low and nestling close to the ground, stood on a slight rise, but the property behind it fell away in a broad sweep toward low ground which grew softer and boggier in its farther reaches. Jane had to admit that Flora was a capable worker. Also, the trunk of the ancient Dodge was loaded with tools.

"You need a grass hook for that," she would say. Or, "Wait a minute, I'll fetch the big seccateurs. . . . Hold it now, we'll

have to dig that root out. You got a spading fork? Never mind, I brought one. . . . Here, use the pruning saw for that limb. . . ." She was bossy as a four-star general, but Jane, being a novice in such matters, listened meekly and did as she was told, learning as she went along.

"That there's mint—you'd better pull it up."

"Oh, but mint! And it smells so lovely."

"Never mind that. Look at the roots on it. Take over your whole yard if you let it."

"Could I dig it up and put it somewhere where it wouldn't be in the way?"

"Down there in the boggy part, maybe—where those ferns are. But only a sprig or two, mind. It'll spread."

Obedying meekly, Jane carried the fragrant plants down to the moist ferny corner, tucked them in and patted earth around them, reminding herself all the while that it *was* her house and her garden just the same.

One morning she came down from her study to find Flora dusting vigorously, shifting furniture around, tidying up piles of books and magazines in the living room. Something slid out from between the pages of a book and the woman bent to pick it up. Jane's face went warm and flushed as she recognized what it was. Flora

regarded it with interest.

"Relative?" she inquired, glancing up from the picture.

"No, no. Just a friend," Jane said quickly. "I really don't know why I saved it."

"A nice-looking man," Flora said. "Except around the eyes."

Jane took the picture from her crossly. "What do you mean, around the eyes?" She glanced down at the face whose every expression had once spoken such a special language to her.

"Eyes give the show away. That's where you see the important things," Flora said, sliding one of her glances at Jane before she marched out of the room.

"Well yes, I've heard she's a little peculiar," Irene admitted with a grin. "But she seems to be doing all right by you. The place looks fine. In fact, it lifts my spirits, being here."

"Do your spirits need lifting?"

"Oh, not really. Only we broke up last week. He moved out."

"Oh dear. I am sorry."

"No, it's okay. Actually, there's someone else I've been seeing, which is why he moved out."

Jane wished inwardly that she could be as flip and easy about such things as Irene. Even loving the little house on the quiet road, she still felt pain on these soft spring evenings.

"Hey, how's the story going?" Irene asked. "The one with the irresistible beginning?"

"Oh—well, actually, I haven't had much time to work." But time was not the problem, Jane thought as a small worry prodded her. She seemed singularly devoid of ideas at the moment. Too much distraction getting the house settled, no doubt that was it. Only now she'd work regularly and it would start to come. It always had. . . .

Then one night there was a storm, wind and rain accompanied by enough thunder and lightning to make the living room and fire a nest of comfort. The lights blinked and dimmed but managed to stay on. It was enough warning, however, to prompt Jane to bring out candles in case they might be needed. She sat back cosily in her chair then and watched a television show in which fearless vice squad members in pastel outfits pursued malefactors and confronted them in crouching, two-handed gun stances. Jane kept dozing off and losing track of the plot.

The knock at the door startled her awake, and for a moment she felt muddled and fearful. This was a quiet road leading nowhere in particular. And on a night like this! She got up and approached the door

cautiously, hesitated, then slid it open a crack.

The woman who stood there wet and disheveled was still unmistakably stylish. "I'm terribly sorry," the woman said. "I've probably scared you to death. But my car simply died out there on your road and I saw your light. I wonder if I could use your phone to call for help." She had a clear light voice, a cultivated speech that suggested to Jane private schools and a pony.

Jane hesitated for a moment, feeling the ricochet of her story bouncing around in her head, then peering behind the woman to see if accomplices lurked in the shrubbery, but the woman appeared to be helplessly, indeed wretchedly, alone.

"I don't blame you one bit," the woman said, and a held-back desperation sounded in her voice. "I just don't know what else to do."

It was the small catch in her voice that prompted Jane to throw the door open wide.

"Come in and sit by the fire," she said. "You look frozen."

The woman's relief was in her voice. "Oh, I am grateful. Perhaps I could telephone a garage in the village?"

"Yes, of course." Jane indicated the phone in the hall. But when the woman lifted it, "I'm not getting a dial tone," she said worriedly, turning to Jane.

"It's the storm," Jane said. "I'm sure it'll come back on. Why don't we sit here and let you dry out a bit and then you can try again."

"It's a terrible imposition," the woman apologized. "But I just can't say no. Your fire looks so lovely."

It had, in fact, died down while Jane dozed, but the coals were still hot and glowing. She added wood and it blazed up while she took the woman's wet coat. Jane took note of the handsome tweed skirt and the sweater that was surely cashmere. The coat had a Burberry label. The woman looked as if she might be thirty-five, but possibly forty; hard to tell. Long legs, slender feet, well-manicured nails. And dark hair caught back in a coil—not many women wore it that way any more. That marvelous look that Claire Bloom had always had, Jane thought. She poured sherry for both of them.

"I'm Anabel Starr," the woman said.

"Jane Gerard."

"This is really wonderful of you," Anabel Starr said. "And your house is an absolute dream. Have you lived here long?"

"Just moved in this year."

"I love it. Beautiful simplicity, and so tucked away and sort of out of things."

"Is there someplace you have to be?" Jane inquired. "I mean,

will people be worried about you?"

"I was headed for the airport, and so of course I'll miss my flight, but that can't be helped." The woman seemed to hesitate. "No—no one's going to be worried about me."

Jane had taken note of a handsome leather case. "Traveling on business?"

"Yes. I work for the Pentelle firm. Cosmetics? I'm always flying someplace or other. I guess that's why a house like this appeals to me. So stable."

"To me, too," Jane admitted. "I fell in love with it. It's so right for one person."

Anabel's delicate eyebrows arched upward and Jane realized she had, without meaning to, admitted her solitariness. How had that happened? A vibrating tension of likeness seemed to be thrumming between her and the stranger. She's alone, too, Jane thought.

"You live here by yourself then."

"Yes." Jane sighed. "I had thought—at first—that I might be sharing it with someone. It didn't work out."

"Oh dear, I didn't mean to pry," Anabel said.

"No, it's all right."

"Are you by any chance connected with the college? I noticed it as I drove past."

"I teach there, yes. In my free time I write."

"Really—what?"

"Mysteries."

"How wonderful! What power you must wield over all those lives you put on paper."

"I hadn't thought of it as power exactly," Jane laughed. "But yes, it is fun. Agonizing too, of course, when I get stuck."

They chatted lazily, sipping their sherry and confiding—just as she and Irene did, Jane marveled. Then Anabel got up to try the telephone again. "No luck," she said, frowning and holding out the lifeless instrument. Jane listened. "Oh well, not to worry," she said. "We'll try again in a while." She was, oddly, quite content to sit in the warmth of her little house with the strange woman, exchanging confidences and listening to the storm outside.

Presently in a quiet pause she said, "He's in England spending the summer. The one I'd thought might be sharing the house with me."

Anabel Starr nodded slowly. "I thought it might be something like that."

"Oh dear. Is it that obvious?"

"Only to someone who's been there." Both of them gave sad little laughs, and Jane got up to refill the glasses. In a curious way the mutual admissions had made them closer.

"Look," Jane said at last. "I'm afraid you're not going to get through to the garage tonight.

And very likely they've closed up by now and gone home anyway. Why don't you stay here? I've a perfectly good spare room that no one's even used yet. You'd be the first. Then in the morning I'm sure we can get help for you."

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"Of course you could. Anyway, what else is there to do? And I'd love the company."

"It's really so—so very good of you."

Jane felt pleasantly satisfied as she showed Anabel to the small guest room tucked under the eaves with its sloping ceiling, its blue and white sprigged wallpaper, its candlewick bedspread.

"I think you'll sleep well here," she said with a mixture of shyness and householder's pride. "Here—you'll want this." She held out a nightgown.

"What a wonderful room!" Anabel cried. "I feel simply awful about this, but I know I'll sleep well. I can't thank you enough."

Jane herself fell asleep almost at once in her own room and slept soundly in spite of the roar of the storm and the rather exhilarating novelty of the situation. Now and then she dreamed—but of pleasant things like nutmeg and kittens.

In the morning the world was clear and washed, all its colors bright. Anabel Starr, after a

night in a strange bed, still looked fresh and well groomed. The telephone was working, the local garage reached. By the time they had finished a breakfast of buttery toast and golden coddled eggs in blue bowls and drunk all the coffee down to the last of the pot, Mr. Kelly, the mechanic, had brought Anabel's car to the door, explaining that it was fixed, nothing serious, something about the distributor cap. And then Anabel was gone, leaning out of the car window and calling out, "Can't thank you enough, Jane—we'll keep in touch!"

Jane turned back to the house, feeling that the whole thing had in some curious way stretched her horizons. It had knocked out her classic story beginning, having turned out so well, but that was no matter. She would go to work on another idea that had been rattling around in her head. Murder on campus. Possibly a visiting lecturer—she paused in front of the hall mirror. It was probably only the contrast with the stylish Anabel Starr, but she was looking downright seedy, she thought. Ragged hair in need of trimming and styling, and—she glanced down at her hands—those nails! Often she shucked off her garden gloves to get a better grip on something when she and Flora

Hammel worked in the garden, and now her hands had a rough, worn look. Before she could change her mind she telephoned the beauty shop in the village and made an appointment for later in the day. Then she headed upstairs to straighten the spare room. Flora would not be coming until tomorrow.

As she pushed open the door it seemed to her that a faint smell of mold and mildew greeted her. She went to the window and threw it open, slightly embarrassed and hoping Anabel Starr had not noticed. Of course it was a little-used room and, too, there had been all that damp weather. But when she went to pull the bedclothes apart and remove the sheets for laundering, she took a backward step and put a hand on each side of her face.

The white sheets were smeared and smudged as if someone had crawled between them with unwashed feet. On the pillow where Anabel's shining-smooth head had lain were shadowy grease marks. The nightgown Jane had lent her was wadded up in a ball and stuffed under a pillow. When she drew it out she could smell the moldy smell again. For a moment she could only stare as the whole episode, which had seemed so pleasant, dissolved into something sour and unat-

tractive. How was such a thing possible when someone looked so fastidious and well groomed? And how could she herself have been so completely fooled? So much for first impressions, she thought gloomily. There was something depressing about the incident that clung to her throughout the day. The little house, which had been so private, so much her own, seemed as soiled and violated as the sheets.

She kept her appointment at the beauty shop, although she had lost much of her first enthusiasm, and in the end she was glad, for her mood lightened as she began to see herself turning sleek and elegant. Her ragged nails were manicured, her hair shampooed and trimmed, styled into a bouncy short cut. She returned home to find the house smelling sweet and fresh once more, and this time her image in the hall mirror reassured her. Really, she told herself, she was much too quick to take things to heart. No real harm had been done. Even so, she slept less soundly that night. Soft animal footsteps padded on the roof, disturbing her. Living here she would have to get used to squirrels and raccoons, of course, she reminded herself. But in the morning as she dressed a new smell assailed her. Unmistakably, a mouse had died some-

where behind the walls. Oh well, that was country living, too, she supposed.

“What in the Sam Hill do you call this?” Flora scowled and held up a sheet. “Looks like you been having orgies.”

“Oh that.” Jane hesitated. How much of the story did she really want to explain? But how could she *not* explain with Flora standing there holding the grimy sheet? And what was there to be ashamed of anyway? She sighed.

“It was something that happened night before last,” she said. “During that heavy rain-storm?” Flora listened, and Jane told the whole story as quickly and simply as possible, then waited for a reaction—a shake of the head, a derisive hoot of laughter—she had already learned that Flora expressed herself forthrightly. Instead, the woman remained impassive, her face bland and almost without reaction. “Well,” she said at last. “Fancy that.” She turned and stuffed the soiled sheet into the washing machine along with the rest of the linens, added detergent and turned the switch to *on*. Over the sound of water rushing into the tub she asked, “What’d she say her name was?”

“She said it was Anabel Starr,” Jane replied, qualifying

it because after all, the woman had not turned out to be what she seemed; her name too could be suspect. "Said she traveled for some cosmetics firm called Pentelle."

Flora Hammel wiped her hands on the front of her flowered apron and headed out of the small laundry alcove into the kitchen. After a moment she turned back.

"Did you know you got a cat on your roof?" she asked.

Jane stood away from the house, shaded her eyes against the morning sun and peered upward. "So *that's* what I heard. I'll bet he's been there all night! Not much to look at, is he?"

It was a ragged black tomcat with a torn ear, bony and bitter-looking. His tail switched angrily and as the two women watched he got up, stalked across the roof peak and back, and sat down again.

"What's he doing on my roof?" Jane frowned. "Oh dear, the poor thing's probably hungry. Maybe I should feed him."

"You never get rid of an animal if you do that," Flora said, tucking her hands into her apron front.

"Well no. I suppose not. Still, I wouldn't mind having a cat. I'm sure there's a mouse dead in the woodwork somewhere. I smelled it this morning."

The cat let out a long drawn-out yowl and paced back and

forth again. Jane shivered. "He's really not the kind of cat I want, though. I mean, I'd like one that looks a little friendlier. Maybe I should call the SPCA to come get him."

"Leave him alone," Flora advised. "Chances are he'll take off on his own." They started back into the house. "What about that mouse? What do I do about that?" Jane asked.

"Give that some time, too. Take a few days for the smell to go away. Ain't anything else you can do unless you tear down the walls."

Jane steered her mind away from the process which would take a few days. "Is it too wet for the garden today?"

"Oh no, it looks pretty good to me. You could plant those things you bought. You know what I got out at my place? A tire—well, an old one—I white-washed it and planted geraniums in it. Maybe I could locate another one if you'd want it."

Jane gave her a nervous look. "Oh, I guess I'll just put them in those pots I found in the cellar—thank you anyway."

Flora shrugged.

It was a shady garden, but since Jane could not bring herself to part with venerable oaks and copper beeches, she set out shade-loving plants—hosta and impatiens, astilbe, ferns, lilies. She saved the one sunny spot, on the front doorstep, for a big

pot of red geraniums. When she was done, she told herself that now that was off her mind she would get down to some real work on the new mystery. She spent several mornings sharpening pencils and cleaning her typewriter. She changed the ribbon and bought a fresh ream of paper. She checked prices on word processors. Then she began making lists. One sheet was headed *Ideas* and another *Things To Look Up*. Then one morning she walked into her study and had just sat down at her desk when a large slab of plaster fell from the ceiling, landing in dusty chunks and crumbs on paper, books, and typewriter. Jane gave a loud, startled cry and jumped up, backed against the wall and suddenly started sobbing. By the time Flora got upstairs she had brought the tears under control and was looking angrily at the gap in the ceiling.

"Of all the messy, maddening—" she fumed. "I suppose there's a leak in the roof somewhere. Isn't that why plaster falls? Because it's gotten wet?"

"Could be," Flora agreed, but she was looking at Jane's face rather than at the fallen plaster. Jane saw the look.

"I'm all right, Flora," she said. "It's just that my work hasn't been going very well, and I can still smell that damned mouse and now this. I'm okay,

honestly. I'd better go look in the yellow pages for somebody to fix the ceiling."

"I've done some plastering," Flora said, but absent-mindedly, as if it were only a minor accomplishment in her catalog of skills. "I'll take care of it. Look, why don't you do something else today—go outdoors or something. Forget about work." There was a gentler note in her voice than Jane had heard before, and the stocky frame, the nimbus of wiry gray hair, the putty face, even the probing gimlet eyes, seemed to offer reassurance.

"Maybe I'll do that," Jane agreed weakly.

She glanced up at the roof as she went out, but the black cat had not reappeared. She walked around the house, inspecting the things she had planted, then returned to the front steps and sat in the sun near the geraniums, closing her eyes. She could smell the faint spicy odor of the flowers beside her. But after a time the smell grew stronger, and instead of being pleasant it was sharp and rank, almost a smell of decay. She opened her eyes. A huge toad was sitting near her on the stone step, its bulging eyes staring at her.

I will not scream, she told herself firmly. Her gardening books said that toads were a gardener's best friend—they ate

insect pests. It was just that this was such a very large one. Giddily her mind ran back over those silly horror-movie titles he had once made up to amuse her. *The Eggplant That Ate Chicago*. That sort of thing. *The Toad That Ate Jane Gerard*. She got up suddenly and went into the house. Flora was on her way downstairs with dustpan, bucket, and broom. Her eyebrows went up in a question.

"Biggest toad I ever saw in my life," Jane explained, managing to laugh. "It came right up and sat beside me on the front step just now."

Flora stood quite still for a moment. Her mouth was tightly pursed like a drawstring bag. At last she said, "Come on into the kitchen. You and me better have a little talk."

She made fresh coffee and sat opposite Jane at the round wooden table. Stubby fingers were curved around the white cup. After a long thoughtful silence she said, "What it is, you see—all these things happening—this place has a spell on it."

Oh my God, Jane thought desperately. She's absolutely mad. Here I am sitting in my own kitchen with a woman in an apron and lavender stretch pants, and she's crazy as hell.

"Haunted? Is that what you mean?"

Flora shook her head impa-

tiently. "No, no. Nothing like that. That's a different can of worms entirely. Your unquiet spirits, your ghostly manifestations. No, this is another matter. And a really well-laid spell's nothing to take lightly, let me tell you. Give me unquiet spirits any time."

"But how do you know—about the spell?"

Flora Hammel sipped her coffee and set her cup down. "I've got gifts."

Jane, beginning to see the humor in it and to surrender to unreality, felt that she had definitely passed from the world of the rational. But what difference did it make after all? By this time next week the ceiling in the study would be fixed, the house would be aired out and life would be going on as usual. "What sort of gifts?"

"Oh—" Flora made a flinging gesture with one hand. "You know, seeing things, knowing things. And special things happening to me. During the great flood of '35 when it poured for two days, I went out and played hopscotch—came in dry. Things like that. It's a mixed blessing, of course." She paused, then added, "Actually, I could easily have been a witch."

"Really," Jane said dryly.

Flora nodded. "In fact, when I was younger I did have a go at it—briefly. I didn't care for it. You weren't supposed to miss

any of your coven meetings—because of needing thirteen present, you know? Things like that. They got testy about it once or twice when I didn't show up and finally I said look, it's not for me. But the other things you never lose. The gifts." Her eyes narrowed as if to see into distance.

"And that's what makes you think—I mean, is that how you can tell a spell when you see it?" The woman nodded again. "But who's doing it?"

Flora sat back in her chair and gave Jane a direct, scrutinizing stare. "You went to the beauty shop the other day."

"What on earth has that to do with anything?"

"Sudden decision, wasn't it?"

"I thought I needed a bit of improving."

"Hair uneven, nails choppy—"

"Yes." The air in the kitchen grew still around them.

"Day after that woman stopped here, wasn't it?"

"She was so well groomed. I felt shabby. Later, of course—" There was a silence in which both of them thought of the sheets. Then Jane heard a buzzing sound and realized Flora was humming low, something droning and with no tune. Finally she stopped humming and said, "She cut off some of your hair and took some nail clippings while you slept."

Jane burst out laughing.

"Flora, that's absolutely ridiculous! I slept very peacefully that night. If anybody'd crept in to cut off my hair and nails I'd have wakened!"

Flora said, "Hair and nail clippings, ball 'em up in hot wax, you got the start of a good spell."

"Well, if she's putting a hex on me she's doing it long distance. She took a plane out of here the next day."

Flora was shaking her head back and forth slowly. "She's right here. She never left."

Jane felt the room turn cold around her. The chair she sat in trembled slightly. Small hairs rose along her arms. "Oh come on," she said, but her mouth had turned dry and her voice cracked.

"They want this place, you see."

"They?"

"There's two of them. There's her—her real name's Bella. I know her from way back. And then there's Gloud."

I am really right down the rabbit hole, Jane thought helplessly. "Gloud—" she murmured.

"Actually, Gloud's higher up. He's giving the orders. Bella never could do anything but follow instructions."

"Higher up?"

"Upper echelons. Much closer to the seat of power."

"Are you talking about—"

Jane felt another quivering of her chair. The mouse smell seemed to be invading the kitchen.

"I recognized him," Flora said. "Very first time I saw him on the roof I knew we were in for trouble."

"On the roof. That *cat*?"

"And of course just now, when you were sitting on the front step—"

"The toad."

"That was Bella. She's not bright, but I will say she was always good at transmutation. For myself I think it's a little on the showy side."

"Why do they want my house?" Jane demanded suddenly.

"My guess is they've been living here right along and don't like being pushed out—it was vacant a good while before you bought it. And it's a nice out-of-the-way place, good hunting for Gloud down in the bog. I suppose it's not often they find a place that suits them so well. But actually, they don't have to have reasons." Flora took a swig of coffee. "I was suspicious when you told me that name, Anabel Starr. Stuck a bit of her true name in there—*bel*; you see, from Bella. And Starr, of course, from the pentacle. Five-pointed star—they always use that."

"And Pentelle Products," Jane added. Then, realizing what

she had said, she scraped her chair back noisily and got up.

"I do appreciate your telling me all this, Flora," she said. "But for now I think we'll just let things go along as they have been. I'm sure it will all work out."

Flora finished her coffee and wiped her mouth on a corner of her apron. "Suit yourself," she said. "I better get to work on that plastering now."

Jane insisted on helping, but even with the two of them working, it took most of the day to make the repairs. Dropcloths had to be draped over everything, a ladder hauled upstairs. Putty knives, chisels, and plastering compound were produced from the trunk of the Dodge. When it was done, late in the day, both of them stood off and admired the smooth wet patch, Flora with chips of plaster in her bushy hair, her coverall apron smeared and dusty. "Not a bad job if I do say so," she said modestly, and Jane said, "Flora, you're unbelievable! It looks wonderful!" The new clean plaster smell was a reassurance. It was her house again, whole and right. And Flora might be a crazy old country type but who cared? What was a world without room for a little craziness?

"And I won't let you go home without something to eat," she said. "Not after all that work."

Let's wash up and fix some supper." She glanced outside and saw that it was darkening. "Looks as if we may have some more rain."

Flora turned away and began picking up her tools, and once again Jane could hear her low tuneless humming. This time she was determined not to let the situation slide away from her. "I took a nearly defrosted chicken out of the refrigerator a few minutes ago," she said. "We'll stick it under the broiler and make ourselves a nice salad to go with it."

She picked up the dropcloths and shook them out the window, noting as she did so how the wind was rising. Another stormy night, she thought, remembering the last one.

"There now." She closed the window and folded the cloths, snapping them firmly and making sure all the corners matched. Because things should be orderly. Corners should meet and edges should be straight, and if you saw to that, why everything would be perfectly all right— She stopped herself quickly. "I'll go down and get that chicken started," she said.

Flora followed her down the stairs, carrying tools. It seemed to Jane that with each step the house grew colder. The front hall held a damp chill that made her shiver. She marched with military resolution back

to the kitchen, and the cold seemed to follow like a cloud, moving when she moved. She saw the chicken on the counter by the sink where she had left it, and then in the next instant saw that it was not a chicken. And screamed. She could hear her own scream crashing off the walls with a shattering sound. The dropcloths fell to the floor. Flora set down her tools with a clanking sound and stepped over to the sink. Jane stood frozen in the center of the room, hugging herself to hold things together, to keep her whole body from flying apart.

"Don't touch it!" she screamed. But Flora had already lifted the severed hand, using two fingers. She dropped it smartly into the kitchen garbage pail and let the lid bang down over it.

"Nothing to get excited about," she said airily. "It's just the old severed hand dodge. Easy trick. Some Ajax will take care of that stain." She proceeded to clean it up, sponging and sudsing lavishly. "Now then." She folded her arms and frowned, making what seemed to be an executive decision. "We'll have to get down to business. Actually it's a good thing this happened. Brings matters to a head. I was wondering when they'd make their move. Now I'm sure it's going to be tonight."

"What are they going to do?" Jane asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Try to get you out of here. A power struggle, is what it is."

Jane grabbed a chair and lowered herself into it stiffly. For a moment she sat there, rigid. Then at last she said in a low bitter voice, "Well, they can have it as far as I'm concerned. I don't know who they are—who's doing all this, and I don't care. I don't want to live in a place where people do such awful things."

"Going to just turn it over to them? Shoot, now, you don't want to do that, do you?"

"It's wicked and it's evil, whatever's going on here, and I won't stay, that's all. I'll sell the place and get out."

Flora's shoulders suggested a faint shrug. "Well, that's up to you. But meantime, there's tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean—here we are, aren't we?"

Jane looked at her, then at the sheltering walls and windows of the little house, all of which had seemed up to now so safe. Now they pressed in on her, imprisoning her. They no longer seemed straight, but leaned slightly as if from outside pressure. She closed her eyes and then opened them and the walls were straight again.

"What can we do?" she whispered.

Flora strode back and forth across the kitchen, shedding plaster dust as she went. "I have an idea. But I'll need some things from my car. And that may be a trick. Once I'm out they won't want me to get back in."

The door was hinged to swing outward, and even with the two of them inching it open carefully, the wind grabbed it from their hands and sent it all the way back, whacking against the house. While Flora made her way down the walk to where the Dodge was parked, Jane managed to get it shut again. She leaned against it and watched as Flora took from the trunk a large burlap bag, bulging and tied with rope. As she slammed the lid down and turned to start back, a gust of wind bent the trees wildly and struck her head on, causing her to stagger and go down on one knee. She got to her feet and plodded on, clutching the bag. The wind tore at her with every step. Her gray hair stood on end. By the time she reached the house she was bent almost double. Jane waited until the last minute before opening the door. Once again it was pulled out of her hands, but Flora tossed the bag inside quickly and the two together were able to pull the door shut. "Aroint thee!" Flora gasped. "Aroint thee, dammit!"

At once she pulled herself together. "Well now. So far so good," she said. "Let's start a fire in the fireplace."

But smoke billowed out into the room when Jane lit the kindling. She backed up, coughing. "Something's blocking the chimney!"

Flora, busy untying the rope from around the sack, gave the fireplace a glance. "I expected that," she said with a short nod. "No matter. Two can play that game." She began pulling from the bag sticks, twigs, and some dried plants that had a stiff, moribund look.

"What is all that?"

"Oh—hemlock, henbane, adder's tongue, nightshade, moonwort, wolfbane—a few other things."

"Do they grow around here?"

"Some, and some grows far afield, but I know their secrets, I mind where to seek 'em out." Flora's speech was slipping in and out of archaic cadences, Jane noticed. She pulled out a small dried cluster of dusty gray and held it up. "Angelica," she said solemnly. "It's a holy plant."

She began tossing them in small handfuls into the struggling fire. "Bring some candles," she ordered Jane. "We'll lay 'em out in five points."

Jane hurried to obey, and placed the candles according to Flora's instructions. The room

was filling with smoke, but it no longer made her eyes and throat sting. It was a cloudy mist now, fragrant and soft, and it moved around her in slow swirls. Flora had pulled from the bag a rusty black cape, badly wrinkled, which she threw around her shoulders, and she ordered Jane to sit beside her once the candles were lighted. "Adder's tongue and pennyroyal," she intoned, "elder, alder, work to spoil. Darnel, bryony, leopard's-bane—" She broke off and said fussily, "We really could use some good horse dung, but I don't much like carrying it around in the trunk—oh well, no matter, we'll make do. *Tán hlyta, tán hlyta*—"

"What is it we're doing exactly?" Jane asked.

"It's a form of fumigation, I guess you'd say—turning their own bag of tricks against them, actually. Of course the words count, too." And once again she began mumbling, phrases that Jane could not make out. Jane closed her eyes and listened, finding a curious peace and reassurance in the aromatic smoke and in Flora's mumbling.

A sheet of rain hit the windows with a crashing sound and thunder made the little house tremble. There was a rumbling overhead followed by a roar as something hit the roof. Jane guessed that the chimney had gone over. A brick came crash-

ing down into the fireplace, scattering sparks. Outside, voices that sounded disembodied began to moan and wail. A window shattered, flinging glass across the floor and creating a draft that blew outward rather than in, so that Jane began to feel herself drawn toward the opening. Her eyes widened. She looked around in alarm and saw that the wall above the fireplace had cracked. Blood was running from the crack and streaming downward. The draft pulling Jane toward the window grew stronger. "Flora!" she shouted, and reached out for the older woman's hand. But when she touched it, it was cold and dead, a corpse's hand. Jane let out a wild scream and dropped it, but then felt Flora's arms grab hold of her and hang on tight, pulling her back. The wails from outside rose in pitch and Jane could feel a dizzy whirling sensation as if she were being turned round and round fast. But Flora's grip on her did not falter. The smoke from the fire seemed to wrap them more and more tightly in its thickening substance. Slowly the voices from outside grew fainter. At last, after one fierce feline yowl, they faded altogether. Silence moved in around them and Flora's grip loosened. Into the sudden stillness came a loud knock at the front door. Jane, rubbing her arms against

the cold, looked around. "Do I dare answer that?" she whispered. "Is it—I mean—could it be—"

Flora held up a hand for silence, squinted with concentration and listened as the knock came again. She gave a curt nod. "It's all right. You can open it."

"I'm terribly sorry," the man said, standing in the doorway with rain dripping from his disheveled hair. "I've had a blowout down there on your road and it's sent me into a ditch. I'm afraid I'm going to need a tow. Could I possibly use your telephone to call someone?"

Jane thought of the lean stalking cat on the roof. Gloud. He was obviously good at transmutation, too. Quite capable of assuming a pleasant shape like this tall rangy man, capable of smiling an apologetic one-sided smile. She scanned his face, studying it carefully. She saw how the eyes crinkled up at the corners, how blue they were and how straight and clear their gaze. *Eyes give the show away. That's where you see the important things*— She took note of the damp red sweater he was wearing; one sleeve was out at the elbow. She thought that he did not know about the hole in the sleeve, and that seemed curiously touching.

"Please come in," Jane said.

He still looked apologetic. "I hope I didn't scare you. It's a bad night." Once again their eyes met.

"No, it's all right." Jane turned and led the way in. Her head had gone light and fuzzy. The house spun around her in a smoky haze as if it were righting itself, making adjustments. Slowly, carefully, she put one foot after the other, trying to remain in the real world.

"The phone's on the hall table," she said, enunciating clearly. "Kelly's garage is the place to call. Do you see the number right there?"

"I do, yes." And while he stood in the little front hall dialing, she went back into the living room.

The haze had cleared; the fire was snapping on the hearth, drawing strongly up the chimney. Chairs were sitting correctly, the braided rug lay smooth across the floor. Walls stood straight; the polished windows gave back her reflection. On the deep sills African violets rested solidly in their earthen pots. Not cute or quaint at all, Jane thought, assessing the room. Strong and simple—it even had a certain rough charm.

A place that would suit a man quite well.

Flora, broad and solid in her lavender stretch pants, was bending over from the waist, puffing a little and stowing something in a bag—an ordinary shopping bag, it appeared to be, the kind one used at the A&P.

"Well now," she said crisply, "I'll be getting along."

Jane felt memory slipping away from her. She tried to grasp it and hold on. "Flora, is it all right?" she whispered anxiously. "I mean—did you get a look at his eyes?"

Flora nodded. "Looked safe enough to me. Anyway, you see how the room's cleaned up."

"What do you mean?" Jane tried to remember something. Candles and blood and broken glass were in her head, but jumbled and unclear.

"Love," Flora said. "The first impact can do a lot of that transformation business—pretty basic stuff. But it's no match for a really well-laid spell." She picked up the shopping bag, drew herself up straight, and gave Jane a severe warning look. "For that you have to call in a pro every time. And don't you forget it."

UNSOLVED

by Hubert
Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

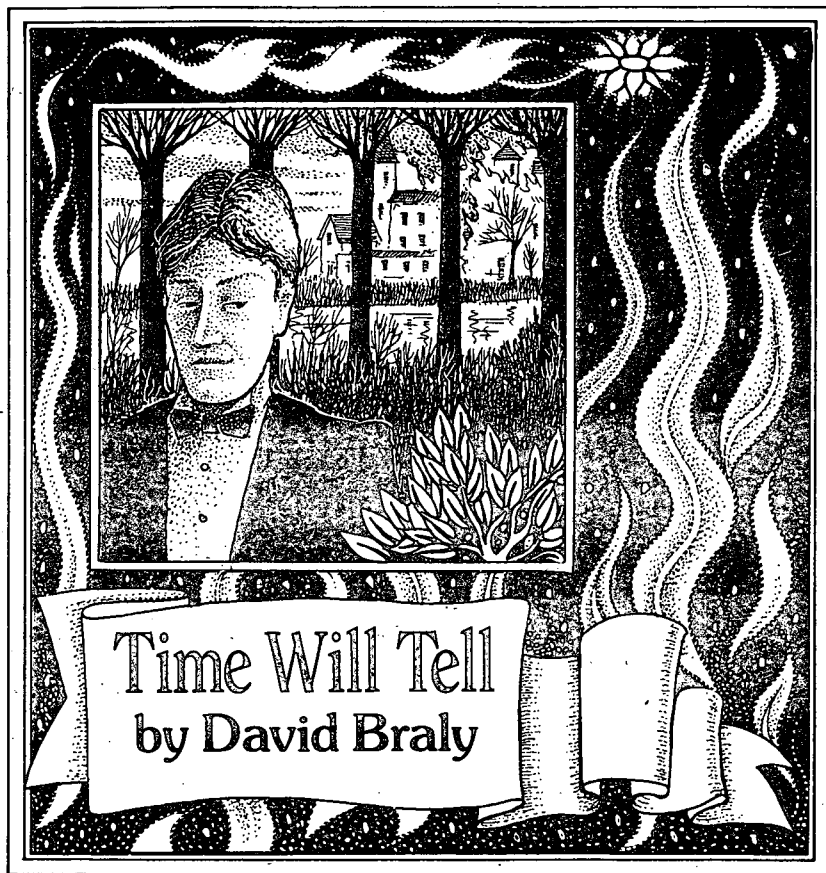
When Messrs. Banquo, Macbeth, Macduff, Duncan, and Donalbain all accepted parts in an amateur production of *Macbeth*, complications became inevitable. They were heightened by the stage director's decision to give each of these gentlemen the role of which another one is the namesake. Nor was this all. At the last moment, the stage director (a temperamental chap named Siward) decided to change all the roles round; and, when the play was finally put on, none of our five thespians played either the part of which he was the namesake, or the part which he had rehearsed.

For example, Macbeth was played by the namesake of the part rehearsed by Mr. Banquo. Macduff was played by the namesake of the part rehearsed by Mr. Donalbain. Mr. Macduff, who had rehearsed the part of Donalbain, played that of Banquo.

Who played the part rehearsed by Mr. Macbeth?

See page 94 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

"Macbeth," taken from My Best Puzzles in Logic and Reasoning by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban"). Copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.



One always prefers a familiar environment when trouble comes. This is especially true of a man charged with a crime, regardless of his innocence or guilt.

A country boy fears the cold, impersonal justice system of the metropolis. Being arrested by anonymous officers, celled

with strangers, and hauled into a big courtroom peopled by nameless jurors, lawyers, and court officials, is, to his way of thinking, unfair. He wants to see the familiar faces of people he has known all his life, even if they are the familiar faces of police, jurors, and lawyers who have known him all his life to

be the worst hooligan in town. He knows he'll get a break from them.

A city boy fears the clumsiness and bias of the small town. Being arrested, tried, and judged by people who look at him as one distinct man separate from all the other men and women in the world, is, to his way of thinking, unfair. He wants the anonymity of the big city, where professionals who know what they're doing move him steadily through the justice system without fuss or bother. He knows he'll get a break from that system.

But when the strengths of both systems merge, when the personal knowledge of the country is combined with the professional techniques of the metropolis, a criminal squirms.

Charles de Richerry-Rohanne was a country boy; in fact, he owned the country. The Richerry-Rohannes had been the most important family in the Lamontie area in the old province of Riom for many centuries. Although they had sold their properties within the town of Lamontie itself, they owned most of the land around it. Their estates were scattered throughout Riom, and they owned land, timber, and mines elsewhere. Indeed, their more recent investments included holdings in Italy and Germany,

thanks to the shrewdness of Charles's great-grandfather, Comte Francis de Richerry-Rohanne, who, by timely political shifts from royalist to Jacobin to conservative republican and back again to royalist, not only had managed to preserve the family estates from the confiscations accompanying the Revolution, but had expanded them in the wake of French conquests abroad, then had these foreign acquisitions ratified in 1814 and again in 1815 by proving that he had actually been in loyal correspondence with the Bourbons all the while. Yet it was not in Italy nor Germany nor other regions of France that Charles was known, but in Lamontie.

There are no records existing now of the sort of boy Charles was, only local stories which are improbable and unverifiable. It is known from Pelletier's own statement that Charles de Richerry-Rohanne was a headstrong, arrogant, and snobbish lad who believed that his family's prominence would allow him to get away with anything. Certainly his killing of stray dogs as a pastime, his deliberate riding down of one of his father's workmen, and his impregnation of two local girls are not legend. Yet his reputation was no worse than that of any other young aristocrat who grew

to manhood having everything his own way. The important thing was that Pelletier and the other boys whom Charles played and hunted with each summer knew his character well.

So too did Charles's father, Comte Roland de Richerry-Rohanne, who decided to leave the bulk of his estate to his nephew and niece-in-law, Jacques and Denise de Richerry-Rohanne. The comte wrote to his lawyer, Hugh Nalapier, on 5 March 1881, expressing his plan to visit him for the purpose of changing his will the next time he was in Paris. The existence of this letter later threw some suspicion upon Charles for the arson, although he proved to the police's satisfaction that he was not in the vicinity of Chateau Charrue at the time.

According to surviving newspaper accounts, the fire erupted in the Richerry-Rohannes' living quarters between one and two o'clock on the morning of 17 March 1881, soon encompassing both of the upper floors of the north wing. Only the vigorous efforts of the family servants and the firefighters from Lamontie prevented the whole chateau from being engulfed and consumed by the flames, which could be seen almost twenty-five kilometers away. More than a hundred men fought the fire. Before they put

it out, the fire killed Comte Roland, his third wife Renee, Charles's hunting dog Pepin, and a servant, M. Noir.

Charles was first believed to have perished also, but at noon of that day he reported to the gendarmes in Ville d'Oiseau, a hamlet about twenty kilometers from the chateau. He said that he had spent the previous night with Mademoiselle Helene Heinrot, a famous Parisian courtesan who owned a country house outside Ville d'Oiseau. He reproached himself bitterly for his absence from home, maintaining over all objections to the contrary that if he had been in the chateau he could have saved his father, stepmother, and hound.

Police sympathy for young Richerry-Rohanne turned to mild suspicion after an inspector from Paris announced that the cause of the fatal fire had been arson, and after the attorney Nalapier informed them of Comte Roland's letter pertaining to his will.

The inspector determined that entry into the chateau had been through a door in the north wing that faced the brook; that is to say, the murderer had entered by one of the rear doors, since the chateau faced the road. All outside doors, and several interior doors as well, were locked at night because of Comte

Roland's trouble with M. Andre Vassily, a man the comte feared. The murderer went to the third story of the four-story wing, where he ignited fires in four rooms and in the passages that led to the fourth floor, where the comte and his wife were sleeping. The hound had been taken to the fourth floor passage to sleep outside the comte's apartment, in the belief that he would raise an alarm if Vassily managed to enter the premises for the purpose of murdering the comte.

Charles de Richerry-Rohanne, for his part, said that he had not set foot on the third floor of the north wing in more than two years. His own apartment was in the south wing, and his movements within the chateau were limited by habit and business to the south wing and the central building. He did occasionally enter the north wing's ground floor, but never had reason to enter the upper three floors, which were the quarters of his father and step-mother. His statements on this matter were confirmed by the servants.

Suspicion for the murder then fell upon Andre Vassily. Vassily had been overseer of the Richerry-Rohanne timberlands until 1872, when Comte Roland demanded his arrest for embezzlements revealed by an audit.

During his trial, Vassily had sworn to kill Comte Roland at the first opportunity that presented itself, claiming that the comte had framed him (although he could not produce any theory for why the comte would wish to frame him). Vassily had been sentenced to hard labor in prison, and had not been released until 28 November 1880. Upon learning of Vassily's release, Comte Roland had ordered all outside doors of the chateau locked at night, as well as the passage doors from one floor to another within the north wing.

Under the Civil Code, a man who is charged with a crime is presumed to be guilty of that crime unless and until he can prove himself innocent. However, precisely because indictment is tantamount to conviction, generally the police and prosecutors take great care to accuse only people against whom they have conclusive evidence. No such evidence of murder existed against M. Vassily. No one had seen him enter or leave the Richerry-Rohanne estate, no one had seen him upon the road between town and the estate, and indeed no one had seen him at any time or in any place during the evening and night in question. For his part, Vassily claimed that he had been home with his wife in La-

montie at the time of the murder and denied knowing even which wing of Chateau Charrue it was that the comte occupied. Madame Vassily insisted that her husband had spent the evening and night at home, with her. The police reluctantly concluded that the evidence against Vassily was insufficient, consisting as it did only of Vassily's threat of eight years before and Comte Roland's own fear of the man.

Public sentiment locally was supportive of Vassily, who was a popular man and who by his own bloodlines and those of his wife was related to half the people living in Lamontie and its environs. And no serious suspicion fell upon Charles de Richerry-Rohanne, who was regarded as a victim of the tragedy rather than a beneficiary, until Helene Heinrot was found murdered at her Ville d'Oiseau estate four months after the Chateau Charrue fire. She had sworn that Charles was with her during the night of the fire, and her own murder could have been committed to make sure that she never changed her story. It could, however, as easily have been committed by an enemy of the Richerry-Rohannes, to cast suspicion upon Charles while removing his sole alibi. Charles himself was in Paris at the time, but because

the young man now controlled one of the greatest fortunes in France, this was not considered proof of his innocence. He now possessed the means to hire an assassin if he also possessed the need and the will.

Pelletier believed that the new comte had hired such an assassin, just as he also believed that Charles had murdered his father, stepmother, hound, and the servant.

Jean-Paul Pelletier had been born on a large farm fourteen kilometers south of Lamontie and had known Charles all his life. They had played together as children, hunted together as adolescents, and sampled the Paris brothels together as young men. Occasionally they fought each other, always they competed, but generally they were friends until October 1880. At that time Charles borrowed money from Pelletier. It was a small amount to a Richerry-Rohanne, but all the cash Pelletier had, and was lent only because Charles assured him that he had learned about a method to win a fortune at cards. In short, a system. Alas, Pelletier, being like Charles only twenty-two years old, was neither experienced enough nor informed enough to be wary of such systems, and he lent the money. Charles lost it. The source of Pelletier's anger was

not that Charles lost his money, nor even that Charles refused to repay it, but that Charles denied having ever received it. People who heard of their contrary claims were more inclined to believe Charles than Pelletier because it seemed more reasonable that a man of Pelletier's limited means would falsely lay claim to a rich man's money than that a rich man would bother to refuse repayment to a close friend of what to him would be a small obligation. Only people who knew them both believed Pelletier. Pelletier's pride was stung deeply by the suspicion thrown upon his honor and character by this affair, and Pelletier was a young man with a great sense of pride in both his honor and his character.

Here matters might have rested had not Pelletier become a policeman. But he had always wanted to become one, and he did so in 1883.

According to Pelletier's later statement, it was shortly afterward, in the summer of 1884, that Comte Charles de Richerry-Rohanne and he encountered one another on a Lamontie walkway. Pelletier's record of their conversation was included in his statement:

"Well, well, Jean-Paul, you're now in uniform I see."

"Comte."

Richerry-Rohanne smiled. "Are you going to come after me for that money you claim to have lent me?"

Pelletier disdained to answer, but instead stepped sideways to walk past the comte. The comte stepped over in front of him.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said the comte. "We really ought to talk."

"I have neither the time nor the desire to talk with you, Charles."

"Really? Well, well, it seems that you are still sore about that money. Such a small amount, too. Well, I'm sorry, Jean-Paul, but I simply can't bring myself to pay what I don't owe."

"You know that you do owe it."

"Prove that."

"There were only the two of us, no witnesses, so I can't prove anything, as you well know. Just as I can't prove who set fire to Chateau Charrue in 1881, even though I am certain of who it was."

"Loose talk, Jean-Paul. Watch yourself."

"You will not escape forever, Charles. The day of the criminal is passing. New inventions to fight crime—"

"You dare to call me a criminal? I'll have you cashiered."

"A criminal. I know you. I

grew up with you. All of us who grew up with you know the type of person you are. You can fool your business acquaintances in Paris, but you cannot fool us, Charles. And eventually they too will learn about you. People like you never change because your successes motivate to continue as you have been, until at last everyone has had time to see you for what you are. Time will tell on you, Charles."

Pelletier always believed that it was his words—about Charles's being able to fool men who had not grown up with him but not those who had—that prompted Charles's move to Paris. The general belief of people in the vicinity was more generous: to wit, that Charles had left Lamontie because he could not endure the memories there of his poor father. That, they said, also explained why he never repaired Chateau Charrue's north wing except to have a new roof built upon it.

Actually, Comte Charles did occasionally visit the chateau. He held several business conferences there through the years, recuperated from a mauling there in 1896, hunted there three or four times, and spent the entire summer of 1911 there for no special reason that anyone other than himself knew about.

And he was there with busi-

ness associates for negotiations related to the launching of an Indo-China air cargo company in 1927 when a servant informed him that Police Detective Inspector Jean-Paul Pelletier wished to speak to him and was waiting in the library.

Although forty years had passed since Pelletier had last seen Richerry-Rohanne, he said in his statement that he would have recognized the man who entered the library doors even if he had seen him walking down a crowded sidewalk. True, he had changed. The comte now had a crown of steel grey hair, wrinkles, and an air of dignity that he had not possessed before. Points of similarity were his height, his black eyes, and even his weight, for despite four decades of married life he had remained slender.

"So, Jean-Paul," he said. "Have you come to collect your money?"

Pelletier smiled. "I've come to ask for your cooperation."

Now it was the comte who smiled. "My cooperation? My cooperation? Well, well, my friend, you have indeed become a strange fellow in your old age."

"Perhaps."

"And what do you want me to cooperate with?"

"As you know, the file on the

murders of your father, step-mother, and the servant, Noir has never been closed."

"Don't tell me that you've come here for some purpose related to the fire. Dear fellow, that was almost a half century ago."

"The file is never closed on an unsolved murder," said Pelletier. "Never."

"I was not referring to the necessity of catching a murderer, for of that there can never be an argument. I meant that surely by now the trail is obliterated by time. Unless a witness to the deed steps forward, or the murderer confesses, you have no method of pursuing an investigation, still less a method of reaching valid conclusions from the results of an investigation."

"New inventions, Charles. New ways of doing things. For example, fingerprints. If the police had known about fingerprints in 1881, they could have found out who opened the door into the third floor passage."

"Ah, yes, but if the police had known about fingerprints, the intruder would have also known about them and would have worn gloves."

"If you say so."

"And now it is too late. All that remains on the third and fourth floors of the north wing is . . ." He stopped.

"What?" asked Pelletier. "What is on those two floors . . . the two floors you have sealed off from the rest of the chateau?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Ghosts, perhaps. Nothing more. It is just as it was right after the fire. I have never reopened the upper floors of that wing. I don't like to think about them. I often do, though."

"I have no doubt of that," said Pelletier coldly.

Richerry-Rohanne's neck and face muscles became taut. "What is it that you want, Jean-Paul? I am a busy man."

"Access to the north wing, including the third floor."

"Why?"

"I am investigating the murders in light of recent scientific discoveries."

The comte turned on his heel and began pacing the floor. "After all this time? But that's incredible. The police investigated thoroughly in the days and the weeks immediately following the fire. A big, deep investigation, Jean-Paul. What can you hope to find that they didn't?"

"Nothing. I can only hope that my greater knowledge of police science—of things that did not exist to them—will allow me to see the things they saw in a different way."

"Absurd." The comte stopped pacing, withdrew his pipe from one pocket and his tobacco pouch from another. He fixed the pipe bowl, then lit it. "Still, I suppose that if I don't grant you the permission you seek, you'll get official authorization to enter."

Pelletier had already sought the official authorization the comte spoke of, but had been told that his request was irresponsible in view of the comte's prominence. Instead of telling the comte this, Pelletier said: "After all, Charles, if you have nothing to hide—"

"Of course I have nothing to hide. Go ahead. Do whatever you wish, but be out of here by dusk and do not return."

Pelletier said in his statement that it took him only twenty minutes to find the doorknob, another twenty minutes to remove it from the door. He then returned to the central building, where he asked a servant to summon the comte.

"Really, Jean-Paul," said the comte as he entered the library, "I have had enough of this nonsense. I want you to go. I am conducting an important meeting with associates and bankers and cannot tolerate these interruptions."

Pelletier held up the doorknob.

"What's that?" asked the comte.

"A doorknob from the third floor of the north wing. I removed it to show it to you."

"Are you crazy? You call me out of a business meeting to show me a doorknob? I think you have quite lost your mind."

"Remember what I said about scientific police methods that were unknown forty years ago?" Pelletier asked the comte. "This doorknob is what I was talking about."

"I don't understand."

"A few months ago I reread the police reports on the Chateau Charrue fire. Most of them were useless, of course, but one was valuable. An old detective named Simon de Gironne was called in by the local police to help them in their investigation. A precise man, M. de Gironne, who had been trained—or so I am told—by a student of Fouché. His report was one hundred forty-two pages long, and included a precise inventory of everything on the third and fourth floors of the north wing. You see, Charles, M. de Gironne believed the same as I do: that crimes which cannot be solved one day may perhaps be solved at a later day when new scientific discoveries—"

"Come to the point," snapped the comte. "I have a room full of important people waiting for me."

"Very well. Among M. de Gi-

ronne's numerous listings was a doorknob with a fingerprint upon it. You see, Charles, in 1881 the police did not know that all fingerprints were different and that therefore they could be a valuable clue, but they did know one when they saw it."

"So now you hold a doorknob that once had a fingerprint upon it. Fine. Keep it with my compliments, Jean-Paul. Now, if you will excuse me, I have guests."

The comte turned to leave.

"The fingerprint is still on it, Charles. Two fingerprints, actually, and a palm print."

The comte stopped, turned to face Pelletier, and asked: "What?"

Pelletier held up the doorknob so that the comte could see the clearer fingerprint. He explained:

"Fingerprints are made by oil and acid which are always upon our fingers and which are deposited in minute quantities upon everything we touch. Of course, that includes door-knobs.

"What happens, Charles, is that the acid has a tendency to start eating its way into things and the oil fills the imprint etched by the acid. Normally, we apply certain powders to the print in order to enhance its sharpness, then we lift it.

"When there has been a fire, however, the oil that we would normally lift has been burned off. But the heat of a really hot fire like the one you had here causes the acid and oil to etch the print upon the metal so clearly that it sometimes can be seen—as in this case—with the naked eye. Other times special photographic work is necessary to show up the print. What happens is that the natural tendency of the acid to eat into the metal is augmented by the heat as the fire is burning off the oil and the acid.

"The print is permanently placed on the doorknob as tiny grooves etched by the acid, oil, and fire.

"The two fingerprints and palm print we have found etched upon this doorknob belong to the last person who touched it, and this is the knob from the locked door that opened onto the third floor from the stairs which rose from the second. In short, it is the fingerprint of that night's intruder—the murderer."

"I—I don't believe you."

"All we must do now is photograph the etched prints, enlarge them, and find points of similarity to your own fingerprints."

"You won't."

"Won't we?"

Pelletier stepped up, lifted

the comte's right hand, and held the doorknob up against his fingers.

"Without the sort of detail and photographic work necessary for positively identifying points of similarity," said Pelletier, "I think that even a layman like yourself can see the resemblance between the fingerprint on this doorknob and your fingertip."

The comte looked for half a minute, then his face paled.

"New scientific discoveries all the time," said Pelletier. He walked towards the door. "Well, Charles, I'll see you later down at the jail, after I get the necessary papers."

The flight of Comte Charles de Richerry-Rohanne to South America shocked all France. The government inquiry into Pelletier's conduct, then the effort to locate and extradite Richerry-Rohanne, formed newspaper stories of various sizes and accuracies for more

than two years. Certainly the story of how a starving, rag-dressed man who committed suicide in a derelict Bahia Blanca hotel room in March 1930 turned out to be the once fabulously rich Comte Charles de Richerry-Rohanne made headlines throughout France, Germany, and Italy.

Now, more than a century after the Chateau Charrue murders and more than a half century after Comte Charles de Richerry-Rohanne's suicide, the story has been largely forgotten. This is unfortunate. I know of few cases in the long, lugubrious annals of crime where a murderer's identity was so precisely revealed by such a combination of the rural and the urban methods; that is to say, of a police officer's first-hand knowledge of a man's seminal character and his newly acquired knowledge of a scientific development in police detection.

SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Charlie took Albert's umbrella.

Comedy And Errors

by Elana Lore



All I wanted to do when I got home was take a nap. I had just spent the day giving my niece and nephew a tour of New York City.

They had been excited about going to see the Staten Island Ferry until they had found out it was a boat. And at the Empire State Building, a security guard finally had to come to my rescue. He told them that King Kong "hadda fambly back inda jungle and he really missed them, so's they let him go home afta da movie." I think he had a cold.

Illustration by Trish Burgio

Things weren't working out the way I'd planned them. I write children's books, and every time I get one ready to send off to my publisher, I borrow the kids for a few days to get their opinions (and to play with their toys). Jonathan and Maureen are frighteningly honest and very opinionated, but I've learned not to get too crushed by their criticism.

Usually I go down to Virginia to visit them—it's a nice break after I've gotten a major project finished—but this time my sister Haydee was involved in a

big court case, and my brother-in-law, Jon Sr., was on the brink of some big scientific discovery, so they had packed the kids up and sent them on the shuttle for an indefinite stay.

And now, after a full day of sightseeing, junk food, and souvenir collecting, I was ready to forget about book criticism and just collapse. The joys of motherhood are too much for me.

When we got back to the apartment, Victor, our aging doorman, looked like he was going to have a heart attack. "That's her," he said accusingly, pointing his finger at me as we struggled through the lobby juggling balloons and bags. "That's Miss Nunez."

Two official-looking characters with short hair and three-piece suits rose from the lobby chairs and reached inside their vests. I could see guns protruding from their armpits.

I mumbled something and Jonathan, who is five and just learning phonics, turned to me and said in a loud voice, "That's an 'S' word, right, Aunt Flan?"

The dark-haired, good-looking one of the two stepped forward and kneeled down to address Jonathan. "You know her?" he asked.

"Sure," he said, without batting an eye. "She's my Aunt Mommy. We're living with her now."

The kids have a tendency to

distort reality to suit them when they think they might be in trouble.

"And she's *my* Aunt Mommy, too," Maureen piped, "so you better not point any guns at her, *or else*." They don't call her Mean Maureen at home for nothing. She knows no fear.

The two looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and pulled out plastic cases with shiny badges on one side, and picture I.D.'s on the other.

"I'm Special Agent Hensley, and this is my partner, Special Agent Garner," the handsome one said. "We'd like to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Sure," I said. "Why don't you come up to the apartment. I have to put this stuff away and feed the kids."

And besides, I thought, it will keep nosy Victor from herniating his ears eavesdropping.

Special Agent Hensley was quite charming. He helped me unload all the packages, and managed to extract the two helium-filled balloons from my wrist without cutting me or the string.

Meanwhile, Mean Maureen has decided her balloon is in good hands—that is, not her brother's—so she has forced a reluctant Special Agent Garner to take her to the bathroom, using her I-have-to-go-desperately-and-you-have-to-help-me routine. Special Agent Garner

must have figured out that she can get loud when she doesn't get her way because I can hear them in there having an exciting conversation about the joys of flushing the toilet.

Jonathan has made it clear that he isn't impressed by cops who don't wear uniforms. He has turned on a rerun of *Emergency*, taken off his shoes and pants, and curled up in front of the TV. During a commercial, he volunteers to do CPR on Special Agent Garner, who politely declines.

Meanwhile, I have been rack-ing my brains trying to figure out which federal offense I might have committed. These folks usually don't make social calls.

By the time I had made coffee, heated up the crumb cake I had bought for the kids, and rescued the two agents from Mean Maureen, who was trying to make them play Go Fish, all three of us looked mildly confused.

Special Agent Hensley seemed to be the spokesman. "Are these children Jonathan and Maureen O'Houlihan?" he asked finally.

"Yes," I answered, puzzled that he would know their last names. "They're my niece and nephew. They're up here visiting for a few days. Why?"

Hensley looked embarrassed. "We were led to believe that they had been kidnapped."

It was my turn to look embarrassed. "Is this my sister's idea of a joke? Are you friends of hers?"

"No, this is serious business," Garner said gruffly. "Did you, by any chance, make a telephone call this morning demanding money for the safe return of these children?"

Yipes. I realized where this was leading, but before I had a chance to explain, Jonathan piped up. "That was fun, Aunt Flan. Can we do it again? You want to hear my kidnap imitation, Officer Hensley?"

"Sure," Hensley sighed, so Jonathan went through his pathetic-victim act. They should put him on TV or something. He's got talent.

"So what's the idea of scaring everyone to death down there?" Garner said.

"It's just a family joke. We do these kinds of things all the time. I was calling my sister to let her know the kids had arrived safely. Didn't she get the message? She would have known it was from me."

"All we know was that Judge O'Houlihan called and said her two kids had been kidnapped and that they were being held for a hundred thousand dollars' ransom."

I cursed in Spanish. "That woman is so stupid. I only asked for ten. I even told her how many zeros go after the one."

I decided to relate the story as it really happened.

My sister Haydee is a criminal court judge. She prosecuted a couple of big cases, and she's made quite a name for herself. She's thinking about going into politics, and I think she'd be good at it. Her husband, Jonathan, is a chicken farmer. He has this big experimental farm where he's trying to develop chickens with fat breasts or thighs or something. He seems to really enjoy his work. I can never tell whether he's talking about chicken parts or *Playboy* centerfolds.

Perverved humor tends to run in both our families, so I wasn't surprised by the notes I found pinned inside the kids' sweaters when I picked them up at the airport this morning.

Jonathan's was part of an official court order, pasted up on plain paper. It read: "You are hereby ordered to report to Criminal Court *immediately upon receiving this summons.* /s/Judge H. O'Houlihan." Below it was a telephone number, scrawled in Haydee's handwriting, with what looked like *me llamas*—call me—below it.

Mean Maureen had her own note, which said, "When you get tired of them, send them back to the Children's Farm." I've been trying to get Jon Sr. to change that name for years, with no success. It sounds like

a workhouse for orphans, but it's really a henhouse that Jon has set off for incubating chicks. He's really fond of kids, so he had it decorated in early kindergarten, with lots of glass walls, and keeps it open for schoolchildren to come in for field trips.

By the time we'd gotten home and I'd unpacked the kids' clothes, I'd thought up an appropriate response. I called the number on the note, expecting to get Haydee directly. Instead, I got what sounded like an ailing terrier with a Southern accent, so I knew it was Mrs. Cameron, Haydee's secretary.

Haydee has tons of stories about Mrs. Cameron. My favorite is the one about how they first met.

Haydee had gone to the courthouse to defend her first case, back when she was practicing law. She had been terrified, of course, so after she had checked in, she had gone to the ladies' room and locked herself in a stall to go over her notes before her case was called.

While she was in there, she had heard two women talking. One of them had said she didn't like pawtarickens, which Haydee had assumed was some kind of Southern dish, like chitlings, until she had come out of the stall and noticed how embarrassed the women were. It finally dawned on her that they

had been talking about Puerto Ricans. Mrs. Cameron, of course, was the one who had uttered those famous words.

When Haydee was appointed to replace Judge Martin, who had died suddenly, it was hard to tell which of the two of them had been more shocked that they were going to have to work together. Mrs. Cameron is about sixty, so Haydee hopes she'll retire soon. I have my doubts about that. From what Haydee has told me, her entire life is tied up in the intrigues at the courthouse.

I saw her once, briefly, when I was visiting Haydee. She walks with her nose sort of up in the air, and she has orangish-green bottled hair. I wonder what shade they call it. Haydee, of course, thinks the dye has seeped into her brain. My general impression of her was that she looked like the kind of person who would wear white gloves and go to teas where mint juleps were served.

"Court is in session and Judge O'Houlihan cannot be disturbed under any circumstances," Mrs. Cameron said haughtily.

I knew she had been permanently barred from entering Haydee's courtroom after she had raced in one day with this "important" message from the housekeeper about Maureen having diarrhea. Unfortu-

nately for Haydee, her microphone had been on when Mrs. Cameron had repeated it.

I said, "This is important. Please take down this message carefully. This is Flan. F-L-A-N. I've got Judge O'Houlihan's children, and I'm holding them for ransom. Have you got that?"

I could hear her squeal, "It's a kidnapping" to someone in the background, and a man's voice saying something indistinct.

"I want ten thousand dollars in small bills by tonight. Or else." All good kidnappers say "or else." "I'll call later with further instructions."

Then I gave the phone to Jonathan, who had been listening intently to the conversation. "Sound kidnapped," I said. He started wailing. Maureen, too. Then we hung up and went out sightseeing.

End of story. Until now.

"I take it she screwed up the message, right?"

Hensley shrugged. "Who made the call to the farm, then?"

"What call?"

"Your brother-in-law got a call from a man at about eleven this morning. He said he had the kids and the money was to be dropped off tonight at nine, at a rock concert in Central Park. You weren't involved in that?"

"No."

"Well, that changes things."

Suddenly he turned to Garner. "Maybe you'd better call the airport," he said, looking at his watch. "The O'Houlihans might as well meet us here. I know they'll want to see the kids. And make sure some arrangements are made to lock up the ransom money for the night. We won't be needing it."

Then to me: "Mind if we use your phone?"

I turned off the answering machine, noting that there were several messages, and handed the phone over to Garner.

"They're coming up?" I asked Hensley, who was flipping through his notebook.

"Yes. They should be here shortly. Jon was going to go through with the drop, and they both wanted to be here when the kids were returned."

I shivered, thinking of what they must have been through today. I felt scared now, too, and very guilty about that phone call. I wondered if anyone had followed us while we were out today, trying to snatch the kids, and was suddenly grateful to the stewardess for demanding some identification from me before she let me go off with them.

"Here's what I got from our guys down in Virginia," Hensley said. "Your brother-in-law said the man who called sounded young, not very well educated, and he had a local accent. Said it sounded like a local call, too,

but he couldn't be positive."

"That could be just about anyone down there," I said.

"Yeah. We've done a lot of checking today—the farm staff, people involved in the case your sister is on now, anyone the family's had problems with. We went through your sister's files today, thinking that someone she sent up might be involved—you know, someone who's holding a grudge or something. We came up with three possibles—guys we couldn't locate. One of them turned up in jail down in Texas. The other two—who knows? One of them, Millard Myers, got two to ten for armed robbery. He just got out last month. He wasn't at the address his parole officer gave us. The other one, Clifton Ames, was a doper who blew up his house making PCP. He's not too stable."

"Wonderful," I said. "Haydee will never let the kids out of the house again. Do you really think it was one of them?"

"They're the only people we could find who had a reason to want to hurt your sister. Of course, it could just be someone in it for the money. All we know is that it's someone local who either has a New York connection or knew that the kids were coming up here."

The kids by now had fallen asleep in front of the TV, surrounded by balloons, toys, candy,

and coloring books. Hensley and I carried them into the guest room and stuck them under the covers without waking them. It was almost seven and none of us had eaten, so I decided to start dinner.

Garner and Hensley talked privately for a few minutes, then Garner left to meet Jon and Haydee at the service entrance. They were coming in the back in case anyone was watching the apartment building.

I had made a ham for the kids yesterday. It seems to go with everything in their diet—pork and beans, macaroni and cheese, and assorted other things that come in cans and are heavily advertised on TV. More important, it wasn't chicken, which the kids had developed an aversion to right after they'd figured out that what they were eating was closely related to the cute little yellow furry things that came out of the incubator.

As far as I knew, they hadn't made the connection between pigs and ham yet.

Hensley made a few phone calls, then came to watch me in the kitchen.

"What happens now?" I asked. "I mean, you don't really have a kidnapping any more—the kids are safe."

"Well, there's still the matter of extortion," he said. "We're

going to go through with the drop as though he has the kids. See if anyone shows up. Your brother-in-law has agreed to go along, even though he knows the kids are safe."

I could tell something was bothering Hensley. Finally, his curiosity got the better of him. "Ham, potatoes, and asparagus doesn't look very much like Puerto Rican food to me," he said.

"I cook Chinese sometimes, too," I smiled.

"Whoops."

"*Arroz con jamón* is what we call leftovers around here. I'm saving that for after the kids have seen my book." I explained about the guinea pig system of literary criticism.

Haydee and Jon arrived shortly before eight and immediately woke the kids up. Jonathan and Maureen weren't sure what all the fuss was about—they knew where they'd been all day—and they were a little bit nervous when they realized they'd left toys and balloons all over the living room, but they were thrilled by the attention they were getting. Jon and Haydee didn't seem to notice the evidence we'd left lying about.

We ate quickly. Jon and Haydee looked exhausted but relieved. Between mouthfuls, Haydee told us what had hap-

pened at the courthouse today.

"I really thought it was one of your jokes until Jon called from the farm," she said. "Mrs. Cameron came bursting into the courtroom, hysterical, telling me the kids had been kidnapped. Against my better judgment, I called a recess and went back to my chambers to call you. When I didn't get any answer, I called Jon and asked him to keep trying you.

"Then, only a few minutes after we reconvened, Jon called to tell me about the phone call he'd gotten, and we called in the FBI. I swear, if this case doesn't end in a mistrial, I'll be surprised."

Haydee sighed, then went on. "So meanwhile I had to recess court for the day, which meant I had reporters following me around trying to find out what was up. Then I found out that Mrs. Cameron, who was still hysterical, had lost the note that she'd taken the kidnap demands down on. Apparently she'd thought that because I would be in court all day, it was the perfect opportunity for her to socialize. She'd had almost everyone in the county in the office visiting. She'd baked some brownies for this guard she has a crush on, so he'd been there. Then she had to relate her adventures with the guard to just about every secretary in the building. Then there was the

mail clerk, and her son Greg stopped by—he's lost yet another job. The note could be anywhere from California to Timbuktu by now.

"Meanwhile, we went through all my files—I'll never be able to find anything again. And there are empty coffee cups strewn all over the office."

Jon smiled at her. "Well, at least the kids are safe."

"You're right," she smiled back. "Jon was wonderful. He came up to the office, made the arrangements with the bank for the money, and generally kept everyone fairly calm—except Mrs. Cameron."

"What about the two suspects," I asked. "Did they ever find them?"

"No, they never turned up," Haydee said. "They really worry me. They both gave me trouble. Amés was selling dope to thirteen-year-olds, and I gave him a stiff sentence. Myers just scared the hell out of me. He's dangerous. I don't mind dealing with them in the courtroom, but when I think of them bothering the kids..."

Haydee noticed the kids listening intently, and changed the subject.

After we had finished eating, Hensley and Garner wired Jon for sound and went over a map of the Great Lawn with him, showing him where he was supposed to leave the money.

As Jon and Garner prepared to leave, there was a knock at the door. It was a woman agent Garner had arranged to have come and stay with the kids while we went to the park.

Haydee and I put the kids in their pajamas, gave them permission to wait up for us, and left with Hensley, who had a van waiting at the service entrance. He thought Haydee might be able to recognize whoever came to pick up the money, if anyone did. I went along to give Haydee moral support. Hensley seemed to be concerned that, with the concert, whoever it was might slip through their net.

When we arrived, I realized why he was worried. The Great Lawn was packed with people. There were radios blaring, frisbee games going, and empty beer cans strewn on the ground. The concert was about to start, so the roadway was jammed with late-arriving pedestrians. Our driver took the van on the grass to a point between the bandstand and the main concession stand. The money was to be dropped in a trash can between the two.

The mounted park police and regular cops were out in force, which was natural at a rock concert. I didn't see anyone who looked like part of Hensley's team, but he assured me they were there.

It sounded as though whoever had arranged this meeting was familiar with Central Park. I mentioned that to Hensley, who said he'd thought of that. It didn't give us any better idea of who the fake kidnapper was, though.

Haydee was very quiet. Between the case she was handling and the kidnap hoax, I could tell she was exhausted.

It was stifling in the van, even though the windows were open, and the bass from the rock group made the floor reverberate. I began to get cramps in my legs from sitting still so long. Hensley was keeping in touch with the other agents on a walkie-talkie, but so far, nothing was happening.

Promptly at nine, Jon walked down the path and deposited the briefcase, now filled with paper, into the trash can, as instructed. He kept on walking, a worried look on his face.

It all happened quickly. A young man walked rapidly toward the trash can, picked up the briefcase, and ran into the crowd. The band had just finished a number, so he lost himself easily in the applauding crowd.

"I didn't get a good look," Haydee said finally, "but there's something really familiar about him."

Hensley was out of the van now, running into the crowd,

talking into his walkie-talkie. In a few minutes he returned.

"Don't worry, I think they'll get him. They're following him to see if he meets anyone."

The walkie-talkie crackled to life again. "They nabbed him. He was alone."

"I know who that was," Haydee said, surprised. Then, "No, it couldn't be."

"Who?" I asked.

She sighed. "It was Greg Cameron," she said, incredulous. "I recognized that bow-legged gait of his."

When we got home, the kids were still awake—and angry. They didn't like the bedtime story the woman agent had told them, and they were worried that they might wake up in the morning and find that she didn't know how to make pancakes.

I read them my new book, which Agent Hensley seemed to be listening to more carefully than was necessary for his job. By the time I'd gotten them settled in, Agent Garner was hanging up the phone, the woman agent had left, and Haydee and Jon were struggling to keep their eyes open on the couch.

We were all anxious to hear what Agent Garner had found out, but he and Hensley had other things to do.

They promised to return in the morning.

"Well..." I said as we sat eating pancakes. Hensley had returned alone, just in time for breakfast. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all. The kids were delighted to see him, and to tell the truth, I had grown rather fond of him myself.

"Your sister was right—it was Greg Cameron," he said. "I can't believe what happened myself—it's too weird for words. As we all know, Greg was at the courthouse yesterday to visit his mother. He came to get money to go to the rock concert—only he told her he needed it because he had a job interview up here.

"I guess she was in an expansive mood after her success with the guard," he said to Haydee, "because she gave it to him."

"So he was the one I heard in the background when I called?" I asked.

"Yeah. Apparently, when his mother went into the courtroom to tell Haydee about the kidnapping, he read the message, realized what was going on, and saw an opportunity."

"I don't get it," I said. "How did he realize what was going on? I've never met him. I wouldn't think he'd know who I was."

"He knows who you are," Jonathan Jr. piped up. "You're fa-

mous. Besides, we showed him your books one day when we were at the courthouse."

"Oh," I said. "So he knew my name. His mother didn't?"

"This is the weird part," Hensley continued. "Mrs. Cameron had copied the name down wrong. She'd spelled it F-A-L-N. Now, the way Greg figured it, with his additional call, and with the drop set up in New York, everyone would think it was the FALN—the Puerto Rican terrorist group. So while his mother was gone, he copied down the phone number at the farm, plus the address and phone number here, from his mother's Rolodex.

"Now, in a burst of genetic brilliance, Greg accidentally copied down the numbers on the original note, which he took with him. And his mother, to make things worse, couldn't remember what was in the note, so the FALN never got into it."

"Why did he do it?" Jon Sr. asked quietly.

Hensley shrugged. "He saw an opportunity to make some quick cash. He knew you were good for it. We talked to him for a long time last night. It's amazing. It never occurred to him that you might be worried about the kids."

"Has he ever been in trouble before?" Jon asked.

"Yeah, he's been in and out of trouble since he was thirteen. It's funny. It sounded like he started getting in trouble to get attention, and the more he did, the more his mother tried to pretend that nothing was wrong."

"Was Mrs. Cameron involved in this at all?" Haydee asked.

"No, it doesn't look like it. We talked to her last night. She's pretty broken up about it. I think she's afraid to face you when you get back."

Haydee sighed.

"What's going to happen to Greg now?" Maureen asked between sticky bites of pancake. She looked genuinely worried. "Is he going to go to jail forever?"

"Well, he's probably not going to go to prison *forever*," Haydee said. "But that was a bad thing to do."

At least Greg would have steady employment now, I thought to myself. Although making license plates was probably not what his mother had in mind for him.

Things worked out fine for me. My publisher liked my book as much as the kids had, and this adventure gave me some good material for the next one. I'm using Michael—Special Agent Hensley—as my technical advisor.

FICTION

The Old Truck

by Nora Lyon

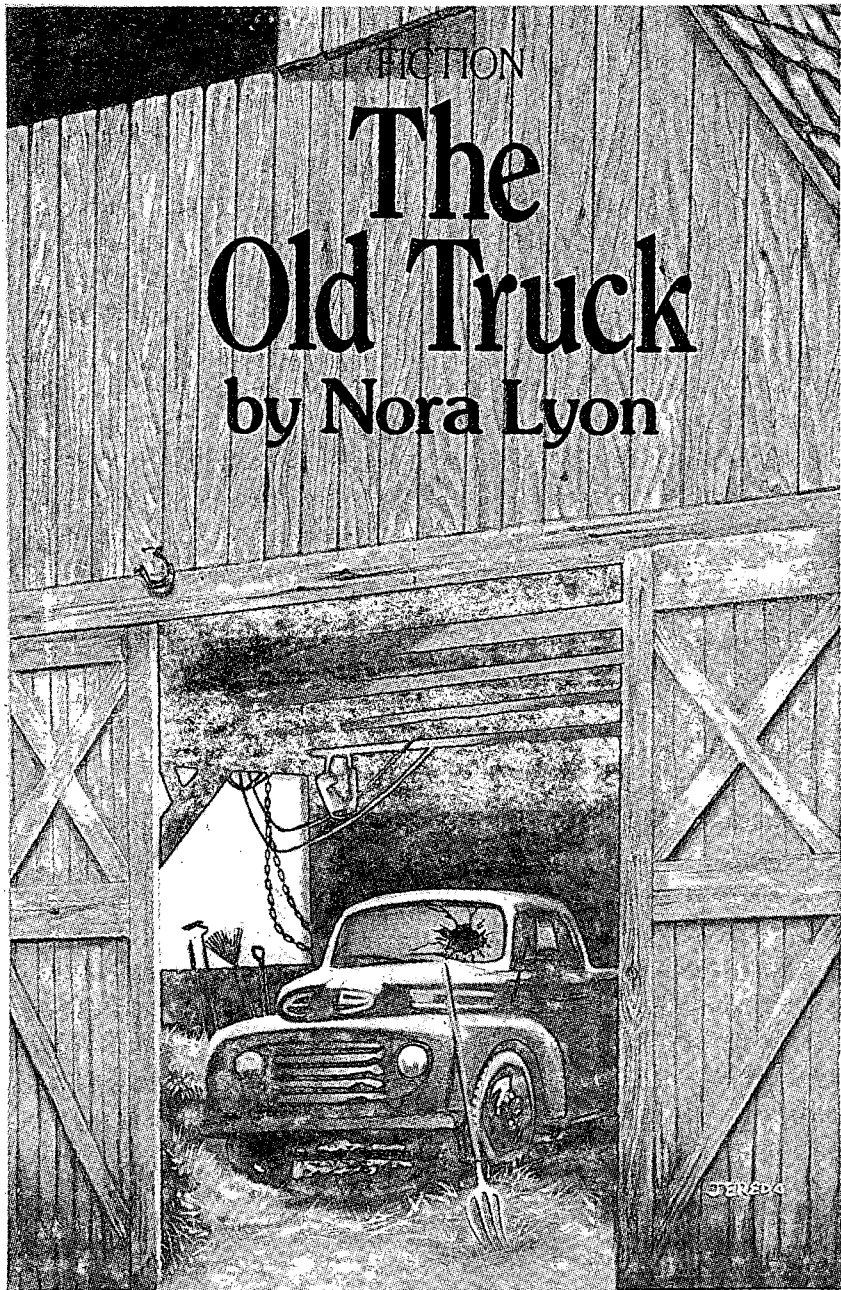


Illustration by Joe Jereda

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“**A**nd I suppose you’ll be spending the morning with that old truck again? No time to look at the washing machine, eh?”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“And I suppose you’ll be complaining again tomorrow when you’ve no clean clothes to wear to church, or ain’t you going to church?”

“I’ll see tomorrow.”

“And I suppose you won’t have time to dig up my vegetable patch or prune the apple trees or . . .”

“Aw, Mom, you know Pop ain’t going to do nothing while he’s working on that old truck. You know he’s set on getting it working. It’s foolish to even ask.”

“Dave, don’t you talk disrespectful to your mother that way, calling her foolish. She’s got a mind to ask me questions, it’s none of your business. It’s mine. Betsy, cut out with them foolish questions and get my breakfast on the table. A man works hard, he’s entitled to eat his meals on time, and without all those danged questions. I’ve a mind to do what I’ve a mind to do. If you get that smelly basement cleaned up by this afternoon, maybe I’ll find the time to look at your machine. It’s up to you, see.”

“Ham and eggs good for you this morning?”

“If the eggs are scrambled and nothing’s burned—ain’t hardly a morning something ain’t burned. Cooking for me for thirty-five years and can’t cook yet. Dave, you be careful, get yourself a woman who can cook. Woman ain’t worth a hill of beans if she can’t cook. Your mom’d burn a pan boiling water, someone didn’t keep an eye on her.”

“Are these all right, Daw? The eggs are scrambled soft, just the way you like them. Good bit of ham, just got it from the store yesterday. Are they okay, Daw?”

“Good piece of ham ruined, you mean. Fat’s scorched. Dave, open me a can of beans, I’ll take ’em with me down to the truck. Eat ’em cold right out of the can. Can’t eat nothing in this kitchen. Smell of burned food’s enough to turn a man’s stomach.”

“I’m sorry about the ham, Daw. I didn’t think a little brown on the fat was too bad. I’ll open a can of beans for you. I could heat them up and the eggs are good. I could open the window to get the smell out. I could . . .”

“You could cut yourself up opening the can, you mean, or burn the beans. Dave, open me that can of beans. Your mother can’t do nothing right in a kitchen.”

"But the eggs are . . ."

"The eggs are cold, Betsy. And my stomach's all churned up from the burned smell."

"I could open the window and . . ."

"You could freeze us all, and be complaining about the cold bothering your back for the rest of the day. I know you, Betsy. You mean well, but you can't think, that's a fact. And you sure can't cook."

"Here's your beans, Pop."

"Damn it, Dave, get me a hunk of bread and some butter on it. A man can't go through a morning of hard work on just a can of beans. Can't nobody in this house do anything right but me? It's hard having to do all the thinking for everybody."

"Sorry, Pop."

"Sorry won't fill my belly, Dave, sorry won't fill my belly."

"Dave's only trying to . . ."

"What difference does it make what Dave's trying to do. The boy's over thirty. Time he learned to consider the needs of others. Time he learned how to do something right."

"Here's your bread, Pop. I hope there's enough butter on it."

"Could have dug up a little jam, but I don't suppose you've got the imagination for that. Take after your mother that way. Can't do nothing right."

"Daw, he . . ."

"Now, Betsy, don't you go to whining and crying on me. Man's got enough to put up with without that. It ain't the boy's fault he can't do nothing right. It ain't his fault he's just like you. Born hopeless or learned it from the way you raised him. I don't hold it against him. I don't hold it against you. Can't help being stupid, that's the way you're made. I've got used to it."

"Pop, you going to be wanting my help again today? With the truck?"

"Don't know what help you could be. But come down anyway. I'll find something you can do without messing up. Lord knows I can't do everything alone. Too much work there for one pair of hands. Sure wish you were good for something—that engine would be in shape in no time if I had some help. Ah, well, no use wanting something I ain't going to get. I'll just have to make do with your fumbling hands. I'll just have to make do somehow."

The old man got up from his chair at the clothless Formica table, got himself a drink out of the leaking kitchen tap, and headed toward the broken screen door that led to the back yard.

"And, Dave, don't forget to feed the dogs. Dogs are a responsibility, you know. Can't

neglect them every time you've got something else to do. Got to learn to be a man, Dave. Got to shoulder responsibility."

As the old man passed through the doorway, his mind registered the large holes in the screen. He'd have to do something about the door before fly season. Soon as the truck was all fixed up. There were a lot of things he'd have to get to, as soon as the truck was fixed up. But, dammit, one man just couldn't run a farm and fix the equipment and maintain a house all by himself. Not with a useless wife breaking everything and no-account Dave as his only help.

Now if only the girl hadn't married and gone to Oregon with that smooth talking salesman husband of hers. Ruth was right handy with tools. Had to respect Ruth, a man did. Some folks might think that he didn't respect Betsy, just because she was a woman. But, hell, they didn't have to live with her burned food and her untidy ways. Not to mention her continual complaints about her back. And her headaches.

No, he was no woman-hater. Ruth was a woman, and he respected her. But then he'd trained her himself from when she was little. Taught her the right way to do things. Betsy in the hospital with that break-

down of hers that he never did quite understand. Good excuse to get out of the work and looking after the kid, that's all it was. Bad way for a wife of less than a year to behave. But at least he'd been able to get to Ruth before Betsy could mess the girl up. At least one of the kids had brains enough to learn from him, and not from Betsy.

Sure hard lines on a man though, having to do everything himself to get it right, even to raising the kids himself.

The day was promising to be warm for early spring, warm and delightful; the scrubby grass was sparkling with dewey-diamonds as it caught the sun's early rays. Daw's thoughts had occupied him well enough that he'd gotten almost to the old barn, where the '48 Ford truck was kept, without noticing the roughness of the path or the broken down fencing. Now, as he propped open the half-rotted barn door, to take advantage of the incoming light of the sun, his eye registered these things and he swore aloud.

"Dammit, one man just can't do everything. This place is too much for one man to run without one damn bit of help."

Daw entered the barn, and his face softened as he looked fondly on the battered, rusty old truck. Now here was some-

thing that could repay a man's hard work, that would never let him down. Useful thing, a truck. Beautiful too, once he'd fixed it up. Wouldn't burn food, or forget to feed the dogs. Or run off with some city talking man, just when it was good for something. A truck like this would never let a man down.

Daw lifted the rust-reddened hood of the old Ford, muttering curse words as he leaned over to view the broken distributor head, the corrosion-laden battery, the tangled wiring, and the cracked cylinder head.

"Lots of work to do on you, old girl. Lot of work. Still, with a few new parts and some paint work, you'll be as good as new, won't you? Good as when I first saw you."

He straightened up and stared into vacancy, recalling the first time he'd seen this particular old truck. It was the night of the barn dance at Hillwood Farm, the night he'd seen the Johnson girl, just come back from her studies in the city. Gosh, she'd been pretty. Tiny-waisted and with a dark brown head that would have near about come up to his shoulder, if he'd ever gotten close enough, she was the acknowledged beauty at that particular dance.

Of course, he never had gotten close enough to see just how high up on him her shiny hair

would have reached. Too many other boys around, boys who weren't so afraid of pretty girls, boys whose dads hadn't set them working on the farm from five years of age. Boys who'd had the practice talking to girls that he'd never had time for, in all his thirty years. Boys with their father's cars and trucks.

Daw had been almost ill with the need to ask the lovely, twenty-year-old girl to dance. Even if she had laughed at him, to have been the one to make her laugh, to have heard that laughter up close, would have been something. But Daw never asked. Couldn't have danced if he had asked and she had, incredibly, said yes.

The twenty-two-year-old, good-looking Bill Halden, with his brand new, spanking new, shiny red '48 Ford, had been the one to claim most of her dances, and the honor of driving her back into town, to the house where she lived with her widowed father, Lawyer Johnson.

Right then, that very night, Daw had vowed that someday, whatever else he did or didn't do in life, he was going to have a truck like that. During that autumn, when his trips to town for feed or tack gave him another glimpse of that same red truck, parked for hours outside the Johnson house, well it just strengthened that resolve.

And now, here he was, thirty-seven years later, and here she was, the very same red Ford truck. Not so shiny or so new, but the very same truck. Hauled it out of the very ditch Bill Hal- den had driven it into, the night the Johnson girl refused him and he was too drunk to see the road edges. After thirty-five years of lying abandoned in that ditch, she belonged to him, Daw Wilson. And she'd be made right, and pretty as ever, shiny red again, if it took him all of his time for the rest of his life.

Yes, there'd be a lot of work here, but she was worth every minute of it. With a truck like that, a man could do anything, could even carry off the prettiest girl in town.

"Hey, Pop, anything you want me to do to help you here?"

"What you doing, creeping up on me like that, Dave? Man could have a heart attack, being startled so. No consideration, that's what you've got. No consideration, like your mother."

"Sorry, Pop, didn't realize you didn't see me coming. Anyways, what are you wanting me to do to help you? Want me to help you take the engine block out?"

"Ain't ready to take the engine block out. I've been trying to figure out where all this wiring should go."

"I told you, Pop, there's no

reason to worry about all that old wiring. It's no good, anyway. Just tear it all out, and I'll put some new in for you."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Dave. Let you mess around with the wiring, and botch it all up. Stick with something you know something about."

"Like what, Pop?"

"Like nothing, which is all you know."

"Pop, I took that mechanic's course, and I did pretty good with it. I know a lot about cars and engines."

"You know nothing about nothing. I wish you did know something about cars and engines. Then I wouldn't have to do this all by myself. If you were any kind of son, I wouldn't have to do all the things I do, all by myself."

"But, Pop, I'll do anything I can to help you. You know that."

"It's a shame, a crying shame, a man of my age with a grown son, having to keep a place like this to rights, all by myself. And now here's this old truck, that I could turn back into a real beauty, only I got to do everything for her with no help. Well, it'll just take me longer, that's all. But it'll be done, and done right."

"Pop, there's no way you're ever going to fix up this old truck. It's been rusting away on

the old Halden property for over thirty years. Even if you could get it to running, which nobody thinks is possible, the body's all rusted away."

"I'll just clean the rust away and paint her red again, like she used to be. She'll look just fine."

"Pop, when you clean the rust away, you'll clean the whole body away. Rust is all that's holding it together. It's not worth the money or the time. It's just a broken down old truck."

"She's the only thing I ever wanted, and I'm danged if you're going to keep me from having her. Even if you are younger, and stronger. I'll take care of her. I'll fix her up like new. And you can all whistle a different tune then. Daw Wilson ain't going to be beaten by any young nobody, just because he's got a new truck."

"Pop, I ain't got any new truck. I ain't even got an old one, just the one of yours you let me drive sometimes."

"Get out of here and back to the house, Dave, you're confusing me. Just for a minute there, I got confused."

"Don't you want me to do anything to help, Pop?"

"Ain't nothing you can do, Dave. You don't know how. Just got to do it by myself."

"Pop, you've been saying that

every day for over six months, ever since you had it towed here. You ain't done nothing yet but look at it. You ain't never . . ."

"Have you told your mother I ain't done nothing?"

"No, she thinks you're getting something done. She thinks you're letting everything else go for something. I can't tell her any different. I won't hurt her like that."

"Well, see that you don't tell her that I ain't doing nothing. It ain't true. I'm studying and figuring the best way to do all that's got to be done. Then I'll do it."

"Okay."

"Go back to the house, tell your mother I won't be back to gag over whatever mess she's planning for lunch. I'll expect something I can eat around six o'clock."

"Then you ain't going to come take a look at the washing machine like you promised you would. She's got the basement all cleaned up like you said."

"No, I ain't going to come see about her danged washing machine. I got this truck to see to."

"But, Pop, you promised."

"Didn't promise either. Said maybe. Maybe ain't any promise. So you tell her what I said. And tell her to see that it's eatable. Bread and cheese will do. Not even your mother's

dumb enough to ruin that."

"Pop, you're wrong about Mom's cooking. She's a good cook. She gets prizes at all the county fairs."

"She's like all the Johnsons. Can't do anything right. Can't tell good food from bad. Can't tell good men from bad. Now do as you're told and get on back."

Daw watched his son's back for a few moments, then returned to his thoughts. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Betsy was dumb enough to ruin bread and cheese. Hadn't she been dumb enough thirty-seven years ago to ride home with Bill Halden. Hadn't she been dumb enough to get herself engaged to him, him and his shiny red Ford truck.

Dumb enough, too, to accept his story that Bill had been a hard drinker, and that the accident was a blessing, keeping her from marrying him. Dumb enough to let him put it about that Bill had been drinking 'cause she'd broken the engagement.

And dumb enough to think he hadn't guessed that she was already pregnant.

And all the town too dumb to ever think of checking the brakes and steering on the shiny

red truck before he'd been at the wreck to reconnect them both. Or of the fact that Bill Halden had never been said by anyone but Daw Wilson to be a drinking man.

No one was going to get something away from Daw Wilson, just because he drove a shiny new red Ford truck.

Daw chuckled to himself as he stood in the failing light from the open barn door.

So he'd gotten the lovely Elizabeth Johnson after all, and even if she'd become frumpy, no-account, worthless Betsy Wilson, he'd had the satisfaction of thirty-five years of paying her back for the sweet smile she'd given Bill Halden, just as the two of them drove away from the dance.

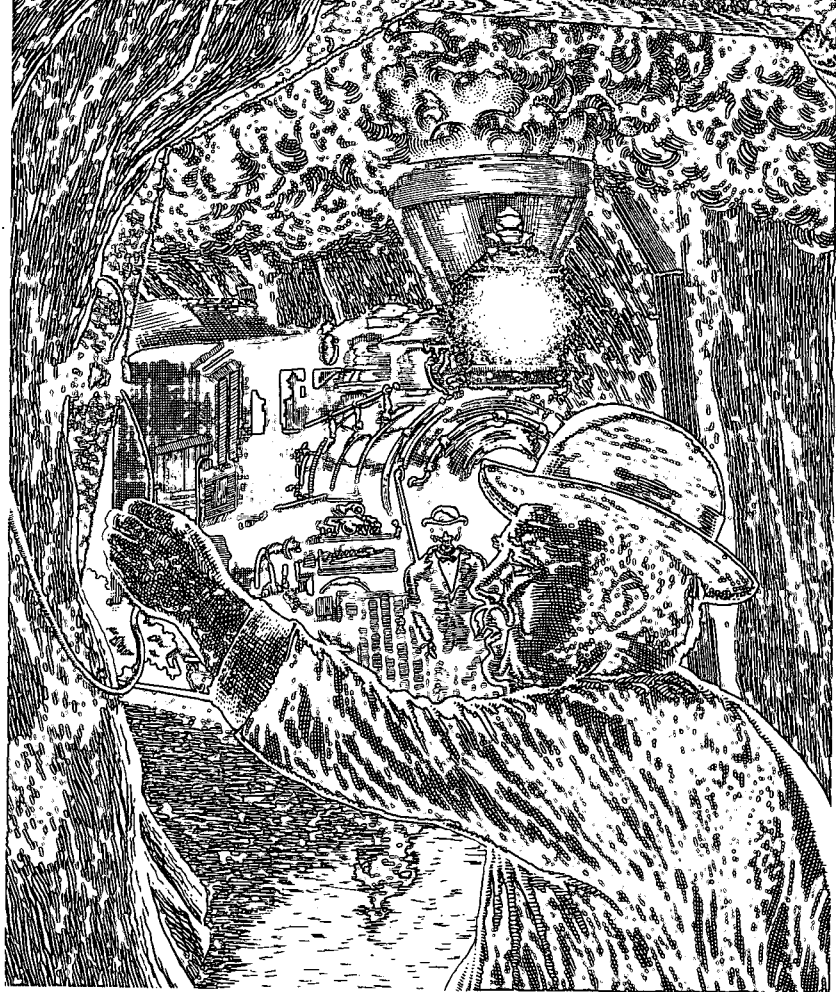
Just because he had a new red Ford truck.

Well, Daw Wilson had the red Ford truck now, and as soon as he could get the parts together, and a little bit of paint, and maybe even some help from Dave—if he watched the boy carefully, so he didn't spoil everything—she'd be as good as she ever was. Pretty as a picture. Good as when he first saw her.

And she'd never let him down.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Electrocution of Tunnel Number Three by Francis Lynde



At ten o'clock on the second Tuesday after the return of the lately promoted chief night despatcher, Dan Connolly, from his wedding trip, the business of the Brewster wire office had settled down, momentarily at least, into the comfortable rut of routine. Everything was moving smoothly on the double division, and between the leisurely inscribing of the figured entries on the train sheet, the fat, jolly-looking night chief had a chance to fill his corncob pipe and to swap a word of gossip now and then with Johnson, the car-record operator who, as "Wire-Devil" Bolton's successor, was clattering at his typewriter in the far corner of the bare room.

It was after he had finished typing the long "record" report from Red Butte that Johnson twisted himself in his chair to say: "Who is that fellow 'Scientific Sprague' that I've been hearing so much about since I came on the job, Dan?"

The fat despatcher chuckled reminiscently and sat back in his tilting chair. "Mr. Sprague? He's a whole team, and an extra horse hitched on behind, Shorty; that's about what he is. Don't you ever go around advertising your freshness in the Timanyoni by giving it out that you don't know Mr. Calvin Sprague."

"I reckon I've already done it, haven't I?" laughed the car-record man. "What if you fix me so I won't have to do it again?"

Connolly held a lighted match to the blackened bowl of the corn-cob, and then put both match and pipe aside to take the "train-passing" report of the incoming westbound "Quickstep" as it was clicked through the sounder from the first telegraph station east of Brewster.

"Mr. Sprague is about the biggest man that ever walked into this office, Shorty," he averred, after he had made the proper train-sheet entry for the approaching train. "Big up and down, big through the middle, big sideways, and biggest of all in his think-tank. He can look you over twice and tell you the exact size of the yellow spot on your liver; and if that won't do, he'll look you over again and tell you how all-fired near you came to breaking your bond record one night up at that little shack station you've been running in the mining country."

The newly appointed car-record man bounded out of his chair as if he had been shot. "I—I didn't, Dan!" he protested, dry-lipped; "so help me God, I didn't!" And then, curiosity getting the better of the sudden shock: "How in Sam Hill did you know?"

Connolly grinned goodnaturedly and made a motion with the

flat of his hand as if he would reach across the room and push Johnson back into his chair.

"Take it plumb easy, kid," he laughed. "I was only talking through my hat—just hitting out in the dark to show you how Mr. Sprague could size you up if he wanted to. But you asked who he is: he's a friend of Mr. Maxwell's, and he lives in Washington when he's at home—does chemical stunts in one of the government offices. He's happened to soak in here a couple of times when we were needing a bushel or two more brains than we could make out to rustle up among ourselves, and—"

The break came in an importunate chattering of the west-line sounder on Connolly's table, and the despatcher righted his tilted chair with a thump and fell upon his key. The car-record man sat back with his hands locked at the nape of his neck and looked on absently. Out of the din and clatter of the several sounders he could easily have picked the story that was coming from the west over Connolly's wire, but the trained operator's habit of ignoring the irrelevant wire chatter was upon him, and his first intimation of the nature of the story came in the fading of the ruddy flush in Connolly's full-moon cheeks and the uncontrollable trembling of the despatcher's left and unbusied hand.

Instantly the short-legged car-record operator left his chair and crossed the room to hang over Connolly's shoulder.

"What's the trouble, Dan?" he asked.

"It's just a little more of the same," breathed the fat one vindictively. "I don't know what in the devil has got into the trainmen lately; this dog-blasted railroad's getting so it runs itself! Here's Seventeen overrunning her orders and trying to make the west end of Tunnel Number Three against the Fast Mail. Nophi says he argued with 'em, but they said they had plenty of time and went on. By grabs! if I was Mr. Maxwell I'd make a sizzlin' red-hot example of some of these crazy chance-takers!"

Johnson was running his eye down the columns of figures in the timetable. "I wouldn't worry till I had to," he put in. "The Mail's twenty minutes off her schedule, and that gives Seventeen thirty minutes to make the six miles from Nophi to the tunnel and the mile and a quarter more to take her through to the west-end siding. She'll make it all right."

"I know. But by Jasher! that ain't railroading," insisted Connolly. "Two months ago you wouldn't find a single train crew on the Short Line that'd take chances stealing sidings this way, and now they're all doing it. Besides, the tunnel's all tore up, with that electric-

wiring gang working in it, and every crew on the west end knows it."

As he fumed, the despatcher rattled his key in the call for Junico, the only night station west of the tunnel at which there would be any chance of communicating with the off-time eastbound Fast Mail. He knew it was only a chance. If the Mail had made up no more than five of the twenty minutes, it would already have passed Junico.

At the close of the impatient call the circuit broke and Junico "signed in." Connolly asked his question in clipped abbreviations, and got his answer shot-like. "Number Six passing now." "*Hold Six*," snapped the despatcher hurriedly. For a full minute the sounder was silent. Then it began again. "Chased out quick as I could, but couldn't catch 'em," was Junico's incident-closing reply.

Connolly pounded with a fat fist upon the plate glass top of his table in impotent wrath.

"There it is!" he gritted. "Now if anything happens to get in the way of them cussed chance-takers on Seventeen, there you are!"

Apparently there was nothing to be done but to await the event and to hope for an auspicious outcome. As Connolly had said, it wasn't railroading; and yet he knew well enough that on many railroads the stealing of sidings, the crawling up upon meeting points by train crews hard pressed to make their schedules, is a violation of rules which is constantly winked at, and punished only when trouble ensues.

In the present case there should have been no trouble. With a clear thirty minutes in which to make less than eight miles, the time freight should be safely in on the siding at the west end of Tunnel Number Three some minutes before the Fast Mail could possibly cover its own intervening distance.

But on this particular Tuesday night the fates were inauspicious. Fifteen minutes farther along, after Johnson had gone back to his table in the corner, Connolly's west-wire sounder began to chatter furiously. The fat despatcher broke in promptly, and again the trembling fit seized upon the unbusied half of him.

"Oh, good Lord!" he groaned; and again: "Oh, good Lord!" Then the corridor door opened and Maxwell, the superintendent, came in, looking as he always did, the square-shouldered, square-jawed fighter of transportation battles, with a few streaks of youthful gray beginning to show in his tightly curled mustaches—a militant figure of a man giving a truthful impression of the fit and purposeful railroad field officer.

"What's the matter, Dan?" he demanded, making a quick push through the gate in the counter railing.

Connolly explained hastily.

"Seventeen tried to steal a siding on Six. Gallagher, the work-line operator at the electric gang's camp, has just called up to say that the freight's stuck in the tunnel—something off the track. A flagman has come back to the camp with the news, and he says the tunnel is blocked so they can't get through with a flag for Six."

"Good God, Dan—they've got to get through!" Maxwell exploded; and pushing the despatcher aside he cut in on the wire himself. There was a brief and brittle colloquy in which the emphatic word was made to do duty for entire sentences, a wait, and when clicking began again the superintendent translated audibly, quite as if Connolly, listening with all of his five senses concentrated in the single one of hearing, were not taking the hopeful information as it came from the sounder.

"Stribling's there, and every sprinter in the camp is turning out to do a marathon over the hill to the west end. Just the same, it will be touch and go if they make it in time to warn the Mail. How much late is Six?"

Connolly gave the time, making the proper deduction for the few minutes made up west of Junico. Maxwell glanced up at the time-standard clock on the wall.

"There is an even chance," he asserted hopefully. "There ought to be somebody in that mob of wire-stringers who can run the two miles in time to head off the Mail. How did you come to let things get into such a snarl as this, Dan?"

Again Connolly explained, and he did not try to make it easy for the offending crew of Number Seventeen. "Jasper didn't ask for orders at Nophi. He simply took snap judgment and went along, leaving the Nophi man to tell me after the thing was done."

"Jasper and his engineer will get thirty days on this, no matter how it turns out!" snapped the boss. "There is a good deal too much of this rule-breaking lately, and it's got to stop short. I won't have it. . . . Suffering cats! I wish those sprinters would hurry up and get word to us! My God, Dan, if that fast train gets into the tunnel before they catch it—"

A thunderous clangor in the station yard below the office windows cut into the sentence, and again the superintendent looked up at the clock.

"That's the 'Quickstep,' isn't it?" he said. "She's bringing an old friend of ours from the East, Dan—Mr. Sprague."

For a moment Connolly was able to take his mind off of the tragedy or near-tragedy which was working itself out to some kind of a climax in the faraway Hophra Mountains to the westward.

"You asked him to come and tell us why we're having this fit of extra cussedness all over the line?" he asked.

"Oh, no; the Department of Agriculture is sending him to make some soil tests in the Timanyoni. He writes that he is likely to be with us for a month or two."

"I'm glad," said Connolly simply. "Somehow, you feel as if you'd got a good solid mountain at your back when Mr. Sprague's around. I wonder if he'll come up here before he goes over to the hotel?"

Even as he spoke the door opened, and the man who looked like the elder brother of all the football "backs" in the intercollegiate tryout came in.

"Hello, hello, hello," he said jovially; "same old shop—same old worries, eh? How are you, Maxwell? And you, Mr. Connolly? Glad to see you both. What's the trouble this time? Anything a journeyman chemist can help you out on?"

Maxwell's mustaches took a sharper uptilt. "How did you know there was any trouble, Calvin?" he demanded quickly.

The big man leaned across the counter rail and laughed softly.

"There is nothing very occult about that," he rejoined. "You have it written all over your faces, both of you; and it is also written in the face of that young man over in the corner, who would like to hear what we're saying and can't quite compass it."

Maxwell explained briefly. "Two of our trains are trying to get together on a single track up at Tunnel Number Three in the Hophras. There is a breakdown in the tunnel, and half a hundred men are sprinting over the mountain to try to head off the other train."

"What? half a hundred? There ought to be at least one or two good sprinters among that many—somebody who can make your touchdown for you. How does it come that you happened to have as big a crowd as that on the sidelines—at this time of night?"

The superintendent went into details far enough to account for the crowd of volunteer rescuers.

"We are electrifying Tunnel Number Three, and the contractors' camp is at this end of the tunnel. It was the contractors' operator who sent in the alarm, and his chief engineer turned out the entire camp for us when I told him what to do."

"And you are waiting to get word?"

"Yes; waiting and hoping. By great good luck the Fast Mail is behind time. If it hasn't made up—"

A fierce clattering of the sounder on Connolly's table tore into the sentence, and in the midst of it Maxwell shot out his arms and drew a deep breath.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated, "they've caught the Mail! Now I'll go with you, Calvin." And then to Connolly: "Straighten things out for those fellows at the tunnel as quickly as you can, Dan, and get the wheels in motion again. Order up the engine from Second Seventeen if they need power to get that raffle out of the tunnel, and have somebody send over to Lopez Canyon for Benson to take charge. If you want to reach me, I'll be over at the hotel."

At the Hotel Topaz, across the plaza from the railroad headquarters building, Maxwell saw his friend and sometime college classmate properly registered for a comfortable suite and otherwise hospitably provided for before the pair of them went to smoke their bedtime pipes in the deserted writing room facing the plaza.

"It's just my luck, Calvin, to be homeless about every other time you happen along," Maxwell apologized, when the pipes were lighted. "Alice's father and mother came through from California a few days ago, and carried her and the children off with them to New York and the Long Island shore. I'm a widower."

"That's all right," laughed the big man. "I'm going to be here in your midst for a month or more, and I wouldn't think of camping down on you for that length of time, anyway. Tomorrow you'll chase out and help me find a couple of office rooms where I can set up a small laboratory; and after that I'll go out in the woods and dig dirt—which it is my official nature so to do. That's enough about me. How are you getting along with the railroad wreckers?"

Maxwell lighted his pipe and answered categorically.

"We have heard nothing more, directly, from the Wall Street people since that break they made a few weeks ago trying to hold up the proxies I was sending to President Ford in New York," was Maxwell's summing up of the current situation. "But Ford assures me from time to time that they haven't quit. The latest competition rate ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission makes it absolutely necessary for them to own or control a shorter line than their present one to Southern California points—this in order to protect their holdings in the big stock pool. They'd have what they need if they could corral the Nevada Short Line and tie it in with the Transcontinental's branch at Copah. Ford says they seem to consider it only a question of time until they absorb us. The T-C people are spending a lot of money on their Jack's Canyon branch,

putting it in shape for heavy traffic; and they can't hope to get the traffic unless they get us."

"This tunnel trouble tonight had nothing to do with the fight, I suppose?" queried Sprague reflectively.

"Oh, no. That was merely the outgrowth of a curious sort of letting down that comes once in a while on every railroad, no matter how well it may be manned or handled. Our letdown has been coming on gradually ever since we got over the 'Wire Devil' scare. Men, good men who have been with us for years, take chances that would make your hair stand on end. Like this tonight," and he went on to describe the causes which had led up to the near-tragedy at Tunnel Number Three.

"I see," said Sprague. And then: "You say you are electrifying? I thought that was a luxury in which only the rich Eastern roads could indulge; and then only for their city terminals."

"It isn't exactly a luxury in our case; it's a working necessity. Tunnel Number Three is part of a shortening project carried out two years ago. It dodges under Burnt Mountain and cuts out five and two-tenths miles of the costliest, crookedest track in Tumble-Tree Canyon; track that we were never able to keep open for ten days in succession during the summer season of cloudbursts and heavy storms. It is a timbered tunnel a mile and a quarter long, and the greater part of it is through loose, dry shale that practically kiln-dries the timber arching. From the time we began using it we've been fighting fire in it almost daily."

"Just so," said the chemistry expert. "So now you are putting in electricity to get rid of the fire-throwing locomotives. Where do you get your juice?"

"In Lopez Canyon, about three miles from the eastern portal, there is an excellent water power. Eventually we shall use electricity for the entire hill-pull over the Hophras and so make a very handsome reduction in our fuel account."

"Good!" was the approving comment; and then the commentator came back to the details. "Electricity is another of my pet hobbies," he confessed. "What company is installing you—General Electric?"

"No; a New York firm—Grafton Brothers. I never heard of them until they came here."

Only the keenest of observers would have noted Sprague's accession of interest at the mention of the brotherly firm name.

"The Graftons, eh?" he said slowly. "How did you come to give them the job?"

"We had nothing to do with it out here. The deal was made in New York, with the Pacific Southwestern officials."

Sprague was nodding absently as if in answer to some unspoken query of his own when he said, "Have you ever met either of the Graftons, Dick?"

"No; they are only a name to me. Their representative on our job is an engineer named Stribling; a fine young fellow and a crackerjack in his business. He was the man who turned out the crowd of sprinters for us tonight."

"Oho! general favorite all around, is he?"

Maxwell laughed dryly. "He has captured everybody except the one man who has had the most to do with him; that's Benson, our chief engineer. Jack is a sort of two-fisted bluffer himself—though it is only fair to say that he usually makes his bluff good—and I think he'd always bet on the field against a favorite. He says Stribling is too smooth; too damned smooth, is the way he generally phrases it."

"I shall have great pleasure in making the acquaintance of this Mr. Benson of yours someday," said the man from Washington. And after that he smoked on in silence until Maxwell was about to bid him goodnight and suggest a bellhop and the elevator—did suggest them, in fact.

"No, I'm not sleepy," was the rejoinder. "I was just thinking about railroads and tunnels and the like. If I were a railroad man, Dick, I believe I should have a crazy horror of a tunnel."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know; superstition, perhaps. You know the old saying:

Every superstition
Is a foolish superstition
Save the little superstition
Of me.

A tunnel always seems to me like a man's neck. One little grip and a squeeze, and your man, though he may have a couple of hundred pounds of other organs in perfect working order, is dead."

Maxwell laughed at the quaint conceit, though he was prompt to make the timely application.

"That would be true enough for us if Tunnel Number Three should ever be wiped out," he admitted. "As I have said, it is in dry shale, a good part of it, and it had to be carefully supported by follow-up timbering as we went along in the digging. I wanted Ford to let us keep the roundabout track in commission, against emer-

gencies, but he decided it would be too expensive—as it probably would have been.”

“And you have let the roundabout track lapse?”

“Oh, yes; the cloudbursts of the first summer wiped it out for us completely.”

“So this tunnel is really the neck of your five-hundred-mile-long man, is it?”

“It is. If Burnt Mountain should happen to fall in on us one of these fine nights—which it won’t—we’d be definitely out of the game as a through line. It would bottle us up for weeks, if not for months.”

A slow smile spread itself over Sprague’s smooth-shaven, good-natured face.

“If I had as tender a neck as that, Dick, I’d have night sweats thinking about it; I should, for a fact,” he averred. And then, after a pause: “Ah; I’ve been waiting for that. The lights have just gone out in your office over there in the railroad building. Who is so industrious as to stay on the job until nearly midnight?”

“It is Harvey Calmaine, my paragon of a chief clerk. He’s a mighty hardworking young fellow—a treasure, as you may remember. He has been getting up some statistics for me, and he won’t take the time out of the working day.”

“H’m, yes; he is a fine young fellow, Dick, and no mistake.” Then, after he had refilled his pipe: “He still limps a little from that foot-scorching episode in Bart Holladay’s back room—when they were torturing him to make him tell what he had done with the proxies—doesn’t he?”

Maxwell turned upon his companion with a frown of mystification wrinkling between his eyes.

“How did you know that, Calvin?” he demanded.

Sprague chuckled gently.

“Some fine day, Dick, you’ll learn to use your eyes and ears. I saw young Calmaine walking across from the railroad building just now—as you did, only you didn’t remark it consciously; and at the present moment I hear him coming through the lobby, with the limp very distinctly noticeable in the click of his heels upon the tiled floor. And now I’ll venture a guess: he is looking for you, and when he finds you he will give you a telegram.”

Almost as he spoke, Calmaine came up behind them. As Sprague had predicted, he had a telegram in his hand, which he gave to his superior with a word of explanation. “That is only a translation. The original is a cipher, and I locked it up in the office safe. It came

just as I was getting ready to knock off."

Maxwell read the telegram and passed it on to Sprague.

"It's a little odd that Ford should use the same figure of speech that you did a few minutes ago," he remarked. And then, with a short laugh, "If I were inclined to be superstitious I might wonder if your marvellous second mentality wasn't looking over Cal-maine's shoulder as he translated that."

Sprague had glanced at the message. It read:

"Big Nine still feeling for a stranglehold on us. Look sharp that it does not get its fingers on your windpipe. FORD."

The big man passed the square of paper back to his friend and stood up to stretch his arms over his head, yawning like a sleepy farmhand.

"I've got to set up my shop and go to work sometime tomorrow," he said. "Let's go upstairs and turn in for a few lines of sleep."

"Not me, just yet," said Maxwell, with a curt disregard for his English. "I'm going over to the shack for a little while."

"What for?" questioned the sleepy one, with half-absent interest.

"To try and get Benson on the wire and have him post guards in that tunnel. There is no reason on earth for it, but between you and Ford you've got me nervous on this choking proposition. Good-night, old man. Breakfast with me in the morning, and afterward I'll take you out and steer you up against some of the real-estate robbers and get them to find you an office."

On the following day the superintendent was as good as his word in the office-finding matter, and by noon the government soil-tester was comfortably established in a couple of rooms on the second floor of the Kinzie Building, in the same corridor with Mr. Robert Stillings, the local attorney for the railroad company.

The two-room suite gave him an office—which he said was about as necessary as an auxiliary tail to a cat—and a second room in the rear which he speedily transformed into a working laboratory, using the young man named Tarbell, who still figured on the railroad payrolls as a "relief operator," for his errand boy and man-of-all-work in securing the needed furnishings and equipment.

Later in the day Maxwell brought his brother-in-law, "Billy" Starbuck, around to the new office, introducing him as, a mine owner and a gentleman of easy leisure, and one who knew every square acre of soil, arable or otherwise, in the entire Timanyoni.

"Billy has nothing on earth to do, and, like me, he is a temporary widower," Maxwell explained. "We married sisters, and his wife

has gone with mine and the Fairbairns to dabble in the salt sea waves at Norman Towers. Make use of him as you can, only don't take his word for the gentleness of the horse you're going to ride. He is an absolutely truthful man on any other subject, but he never misses a chance to play a bucking bronc against a tenderfoot."

Sprague foregathered at once with the clean-cut, rather shabbily clothed young mine owner, whose principal affectations were his worn khaki suit, a cowboy Stetson tilted carelessly to the back of his head, and a vocabulary of cowcamp slang which happened to be no measure of his knowledge of grammatical English. Before he left the newly established laboratory in the Kinzie Building, Starbuck had engaged to go with the expert on a soil-collecting trip through the Park, the trip to begin early in the morning of the following day, and to continue indefinitely; or until the chief soil-hunter should be sufficiently saddlesore to wish to cut it short.

"I like that brother-in-law of yours a whole heap, Dick," was Sprague's verdict when he met the superintendent at dinner in the Topaz cafe that evening. "He is a man with a history, isn't he?"

The queer look which Sprague seemed to be able to evoke at will in his tablemate crept into Maxwell's eyes.

"Did you ever meet Billy before I took him into your office this afternoon?" he asked.

"No."

"Ever hear of him before?"

"No."

"All right; now I'm going to try you out good and hard. You intimate that he is a man with a history. What is his history?"

The expert sat back, thrust his hands into his pockets, and for a moment seemed to go into a trance, with his gaze fixed upon the ornate decorations of the cafe ceiling.

"I'll make what you will probably call a series of wild guesses," he said at length, "prefacing them with the assurance, which you must take at its face value, that Mr. Starbuck has told me nothing whatever of himself—at least, not consciously."

"Go on," said Maxwell.

"In the first place, he is an educated man—a college man—and he talks cowboy English only because it suits his fancy to talk it. Also, though he wears khaki and a cowboy hat, he is quite as much at home in evening clothes as you or I. Am I right, so far?"

"Yes."

"Beyond that, he is a man of many accomplishments, most of which he is at some pains to conceal. In his younger youth, if not

later, he was a bit wild—too much money to spend, I take it—and the wildness, or some of its consequences, landed him in jail; no, it wasn't a jail—it was a penitentiary."

Maxwell's look of amused half-triumph had changed to one of sober consternation.

"*Calvin!*" he exclaimed, in low tones. "You must know; you must have heard—"

"I pledge you my word, Dick; I am cutting this out of whole cloth, so far as any outside information is concerned. But let me go on. Whatever Mr. Starbuck was, or whatever he did, he was never a criminal in the true sense of the word. So far from it, I can assure you of what you doubtless know for yourself; that he is a man to tie to—a true man and a loyal friend and kinsman. I'm going to take the field with him tomorrow morning, and we shall come back brothers of the blood. That's a measure of my regard for him."

Maxwell put down his knife and fork and said what clansman relationship demanded.

"Listen," he began, "and see how frightfully near you have shaved the truth in your 'guesses.' In his early manhood Billy was a cowpunch—in the college-graduate class, as you intimate. He discovered a mine, sold it for a fat wad, and went to New York, where he blew in the wad to the final dollar."

Sprague nodded. "That was the wild sidestep that I couldn't quite place," he said, and the superintendent went on.

"When his money was gone he went to work as a stenographer for a firm of brokers, and was holding the job down when the safe was tapped and a sum of money stolen. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to a term in Sing Sing, where he served his time. It was late in the first year of his freedom before a few of us who were his friends here in the West found out that he had voluntarily gone to prison to save a fellow clerk—a half-dead, broken-down scoundrel with a wife and children, a sick mother, and a crippled sister."

"Fine!" Sprague was beginning to say; but Maxwell interposed.

"No, hold on; you mustn't set him down as an impossible hero. He'd be the first to object to that. I said, 'voluntarily,' and it really amounted to that, though when Billy promised not to betray the scoundrel he had no idea that he was going to be made to suffer in his place. Nevertheless, since the promise had been given, Billy made good."

Sprague smiled. "Entirely without prejudice to a hearty and man-sized hatred for the man who let him go in the hole, you'd say?"

"Exactly; entirely without prejudice to that very human passion."

"Well," said the expert; "my summing up was true, anyhow. I was sure he had that kind of stuff in him, and that he had been tried out along some such line as that."

Maxwell nodded, and then he became insistent.

"Now tell me—you've got to tell me, Calvin, how you did it."

Sprague's mellow, booming laugh earned him more than one curious glance from the surrounding tables.

"I can no more tell you, Dick, than I can explain why, to a majority of people, white is white and black is black. For my own satisfaction I define the 'how' as a natural growth, favored by habit and training, of the scientific attitude; the mental slant which, if given free play, almost unconsciously notes, marks, deduces, reasons; deeming nothing too small or too trifling to go toward making up the whole of any conclusion. More than that, in my own case the faculty is able to hold itself workably aloof from the ordinary distractions of conversation and the like. It goes on, using the outward senses when it needs them, to be sure, but only as aids to the developing of its own little film in its own little darkroom. Do you get the idea?"

"Only partly. Even science has to have its raw materials to work on."

"Oh, yes; and the materials lie all around us constantly, if we only know how to weigh and measure them. In Starbuck's case, now, there were little lapses from the cowboy talk to tell me that he was an educated man; also, he has the true modesty of those who can really do things. Then there were gaps in his talk, little loopholes, you might call them, through which I could look back through the years and get glimpses of that period of dissipation. Each glimpse revealed a tiny earmark of the man who knows—who can only know—because he has been there."

"Go on," urged Maxwell, still only half-convinced that the deductions were not, in the last analysis, only shrewd guesses. "None of these things told you that he had been in prison."

"No; as to that, I'll admit I set a harmless trap for him. I fancied once, and then again, that I saw the prison look in his eye; the quick sideglance that a long term prisoner learns to give without turning his head—notice it the next time you happen to be in a penitentiary, if you are ever so unfortunate as to visit one."

"I have noticed it," said Maxwell, and the expert went on.

"When I saw that, the scientific mentality said instantly, 'That look wasn't acquired in a jail term—it took longer.' The next sug-

gestion followed as a matter of course. Every longterm man answers to a number instead of to his name. At the moment I was numbering the bottles of chemicals which Tarbell had been buying for me, and I turned the talk upon my peculiar system of labeling—by numbers. Starbuck himself did the rest. He said, 'I reckon I wouldn't rent even a post office box if it had to have a number on it.' That was all, but it was enough."

Maxwell was toying with his dessert.

"As I have said several times before, Calvin, you are almost uncanny now and then. You know too much. Some fine day it will strike in on you—sour on you and make you sick."

Sprague's mellow laugh sounded again.

"I haven't begun to tell you all I know. For example, I might say that all through this spell of gossip about your brother-in-law you've been giving the subject no more than a scant half of your mind. The other half has been tussling with your railroad involvement, and you've been wondering where the Big Nine is going to land on you next. What do you hear from Tunnel Number Three?"

"Nothing much; or at least nothing out of the ordinary. They got the tangle straightened out last night after a time. Benson wires that Stribling put the entire electrifying force under his orders, and was all kinds of nice about it."

"'Electrifying,'" repeated Sprague musingly. "A slight change in the spelling would make it 'electrocuting,' wouldn't it? How long will it be before the installation is completed?"

"They are starting the turbines in Lopez Canyon today, for a tryout. The wires are all strung, and Stribling is installing some sort of a safety contrivance in the tunnel as a finishing touch; a switch of some kind that will shunt the current in case any accident should happen to a train in transit.

"It's all Greek to me—and to Benson, for that matter. Neither of us knows enough about electric installations to keep us from spoiling."

"But the date," said Sprague, with the amiable persistence which was one of his chief characteristics. "When will the current be turned on?"

"Stribling sends word that he will be ready to cut the power in on the tunnel wires tomorrow evening at six o'clock, and asks if I'm going to be on hand to see it done."

Sprague was deftly clipping the tip from one of the cigars which the waiter had brought, preparatory to lighting it.

"Do you happen to have a timetable in your pocket?" he asked.

Maxwell had one, and he passed it across the table. The government man postponed the lighting of his cigar and began to turn the leaves of the official schedule handbook. At the pages listing the trains on the Hophra Division he paused and ran his finger slowly down the columns giving the movement of traffic to and through Tunnel Number Three.

"You would have to leave here early in the afternoon to reach the tunnel by six—or rather to be there at six—wouldn't you?" he asked, returning the timetable.

Maxwell shook his head and smiled. "You forget that I'm not tied to regular trains on my own piece of railroad," he suggested. "I couldn't afford to go up on Three and spend two or three hours loafing around. If I go, I shall order out a car and engine and make a quick job of it. It is only sixty-three miles, and I can make it special in an hour and thirty minutes or thereabouts."

"I see," said Sprague reflectively. "Leaving Brewster about three thirty, say?"

"Yes; that would be plenty early enough."

"But you don't know yet whether you will go at all?"

"No. There is a delegation of ore-shippers coming down from Red Butte tomorrow, and I'll be busy with it a good part of the day."

After that the talk drifted to other things, among them the expert's mission to the Timanyoni, which, he admitted in confidence, was the preliminary to a possible government reclamation project. And finally, when Maxwell broke away to go back to his office across the plaza, his going or not going to the tunnel to be present at the turning of the power current on the following day was left undecided.

According to the prearranged program, Sprague left Brewster at daylight the next morning, riding with Starbuck to the upper valley of the Gloria where the first of the soil specimens were to be collected. But for some reason, saddlesoreness on the part of the tenderfoot, or another, the trip was a short one, ending a little after noon, when the two came jogging back through the Brewster streets.

From their corner table in the Topaz cafe, where they ate their late luncheon together, they saw Maxwell entertaining a party of the ore-shippers; and later Sprague, whose half-absent gaze seemed to miss nothing, saw a good-looking young fellow in shabby, work-stained brown duck push through the swinging glazed doors opening from the lobby and go around to whisper to Maxwell at the table of entertainment.

Sprague called his companion's attention to the newcomer.

"That will be Mr. Benson, chief engineer of the railroad, for a guess," he ventured; and Starbuck nodded.

"Right you are. It's Jack; and to look at him you sure wouldn't think he was a married man, with a nice, tidy little wife at home, would you, now? He always looks as if he had just tumbled out of the dirtiest car in his worktrain."

The soil expert smiled leniently. "Possibly he is here on business, and sometimes business won't wait," he suggested. "See; your brother-in-law is excusing himself to the ore people and is going out with Benson. After we finish our luncheon I'll ask you to do me a little favor, Mr. Starbuck: Find Mr. Maxwell and tell him we're back—just on the chance that he didn't see us over here in this dark corner of ours. I'd like to meet Mr. Benson, if it can be managed without too much trouble."

Starbuck's keen gray eyes searched the round, double-chinned face of his newly made acquaintance shrewdly.

"I reckon I'm on," he said slowly. "I was beginning to climb on before you said anything. That New York crowd is after Dick and his railroad with a black-snake whip; I know that much. Is the whip getting ready to pop again?"

"I'm a little afraid it is, Mr. Starbuck, and I am hoping that Mr. Benson will be able to tell us whether it is or isn't," was the event-toned rejoinder. "At all events, I'd like to meet him and have a talk with him—some time before three o'clock. Bear the hour in mind, will you, please? and try to arrange it for me."

"Sure," said Starbuck; and when they rose from the table he went in search of the superintendent and Benson, leaving his luncheon companion to go around to the Kinzie Building laboratory alone.

It was something less than half an hour after Sprague had stripped his coat and gone to work on the soil specimens of the morning's gathering when Starbuck came in, bringing Maxwell and Benson. As Starbuck made it appear, the visit was merely a neighborly drop-in, with no better excuse than the expressed purpose of introducing Sprague to a possible helper.

"I thought you might be able to use Jack in some way, Mr. Sprague," he said, after the introduction was a fact accomplished. "He sure knows a heap more about Timanyoni dirt than anybody else between the two ranges; carries right smart of it around on his clothes a good deal of the time."

Benson took the joke in good part; and when Sprague had found

and opened a box of his irreproachable cigars, the talk, touching lightly at first upon Sprague's business in the West, came around, or was brought around, to Benson's part in the electrification job. The big expert with the fighting jaw and the sympathetic gray eyes had a way of leading even a reticent man to tell of his troubles; and Benson, knowing the part Sprague had taken in defeating the two previous attempts to wreck the Short Line, felt free to unburden himself.

"I can't make Maxwell, here, believe that Stribling is anything but the fine, open-handed young fellow that he seems to be; but I want to tell you three together what I have often told Maxwell: I've got a hunch. I don't *know* a blessed thing. Stribling has always treated me fine, and he is a fellow you can hardly help cottoning to, right from the jump. But some way something inside of me keeps on telling me that he's too smooth—too damned smooth. Last night, for instance, in that derailment muddle—there wasn't anything he wouldn't do, didn't do, to help us out. He packed his men into the tunnel so thick that nobody could get near that derailed car; in fact, he had the car on the rails and the train backing out before I could get any action at all."

"What caused the derailment, Mr. Benson?" Sprague put in quietly.

"That was one of the things that made me hot. Stribling's messing in made it impossible for anybody to tell. There was nothing the matter with the track or with the car, so far as I could see after the thing was over. Bamberg, the engineer who was pulling the train, swears that somebody flagged him down with a red light when he was about halfway through the tunnel, and he stopped. Then the red changed to white and gave him the 'go-ahead.' When he tried to start his train, this boxcar, somewhere along in the middle of things, jumped the track and blocked the tunnel. He felt the jerk and stopped again."

Sprague waved a hand in token of his complete satisfaction.

"Suppose we ignore this train tangle for the present and come to other things," he interposed. "I've been wondering if you could describe for me, briefly, the details of this tunnel installation, Mr. Benson?"

"Why, yes; it's simple enough—it's merely a trolley line on a big scale: two heavy copper trolley wires strung through on catenary brackets, with double insulation. That's all, except the safety-switches—cutouts—one at each end and one in the middle of the tunnel."

"Ah?" said the expert, mildly interested at last; "one in the middle, you say? What is that for?"

"It is the real safety device, Stribling says; the others are merely mechanical cutouts for the use of the wire repairers. He was explaining it to me this morning when he was connecting it in with the power wires. It's an ordinary oil-protected switch so adjusted that in case an accident happens to a train in the tunnel the circuit will be broken automatically and the live-wire current cut out. It's a good thing, you'd say. It would make your flesh creep to think what it would mean to have those high-power wires shortcircuiting into a wreck."

"We won't think of it," said the big man quizzically. "We'll think rather of this Mr. Stribling and your—thus far—unexplained suspicions. How did he contrive to send you down here today?"

Benson looked up quickly.

"How did you know he sent me? I didn't say he did, did I? But I guess that is what it amounts to. He made it a sort of personal matter; urged me to come and bring Mr. Maxwell back with me; said that on a job as big as ours he didn't want to take any chances with his reputation as an electrical engineer or leave any room for a misunderstanding. He'd like to have Maxwell go foot by foot over the installation and see that everything is all right and safe before the power is turned on and the first electric train is sent through."

Sprague put his face in his hands and for a few seconds the silence in the makeshift laboratory was unbroken. Then suddenly he came to life again. "You were telling us about this internal safety device," he broke out abruptly. "It's an oil-switch, you say?"

"Yes; there is an iron tank to hold the oil, and—"

"Hold on; where do you find room in the tunnel for a tank?"

"In one of the side excavations. When we were driving the tunnel we left side niches every two hundred feet or so; safety-holes for the men in blasting, and places where we could store dynamite and tools out of danger and out of the way."

"Stop. Was this particular dodge-hole where the safety switch is placed ever used for dynamite storing?"

"Yes; there are a lot of empty boxes in it now. In the arching, the timber-setters had covered them in, I suppose, and they were overlooked in the cleaning out."

"You are sure they are empty?"

"Oh, yes; they're empty all right. Stribling called my attention to them this morning, and I kicked over two or three of them, at his suggestion, just to make sure that they were empty."

"I see; he called your attention to them, did he? That is interesting, but not nearly as interesting as this oil-switch you've been trying to describe for me. Go over it again, will you?"

The young chief engineer was evidently disappointed. The scientist of whose gifts he had heard so much seemed to have a brain in which pertinacity, the pertinacity which clings helplessly to trivial and perfectly obvious things, was the overshadowing faculty.

"I don't know that I can make it any plainer," he said, with a touch of impatience. "It's just an ordinary electric circuit-breaker, the same as they use on streetcars, and it is buried in oil to keep it from arcing—as all switches are when they're under voltages as high as ours will be. The mechanism is suspended in a tank by its own wires, and the tank is filled with oil. I was there when they were filling the tank this morning, and Stribling poured a queer syrupy mess in on top of it—some patent stuff to keep the oil from thickening under exposure, he said."

"A patent mixture, eh? I'm interested in patents," said the listener, going off at another of the blind tangents. "How did it come—in a can?"

"Yes; in four square cans, holding about a gallon or so each, I should say. They were packed in a box—like varnish cans, you know—only they were taller and not so big in section."

"I suppose you weren't near enough to notice any name or advertisement on these cans, were you?"

Benson had by this time lost all hope of finding anything like continuity in the big man's mind, but he answered the query.

"Yes, I was near enough; Stribling was up on the tank and I passed the cans up to him, one at a time—and spilled the stuff all over me doing it. There wasn't any name on them. They were just plain square tin cans; that's all."

Sprague got up and crossed over to Benson's chair.

"Spilled it on you, eh? Is this the stain of it on your coat?" he asked; and when Benson nodded: "It's too bad to spoil a perfectly good workingcoat that way. Suppose you let me have it and I'll see if I can't take those spots out of it."

Benson obeyed, half-contemptuously, and, together with the two who had taken no part in the colloquy, looked on curiously while the expert, who had apparently lost all interest in everything save the coat-cleaning, swiftly treated the stained patches with various chemicals, put the resultant washings into a beaker and began to add ingredients from sundry bottles on the laboratory shelves, hold-

ing the beaker to the light after each fresh addition to note if there were changing colors in the solution.

At the close of the rapidly conducted experiment he poured a little of the solution into a tiny test-tube, which he proceeded to heat over the flame of a small alcohol lamp. This part of whatever experiment he was attempting appeared to be unsuccessful. Almost immediately the test-tube cracked with a miniature explosion, scattering bits of broken glass and extinguishing the flame of the little lamp.

Sprague tossed the neck of the shattered glass tube aside and returned the brown-duck shooting coat to its owner. Benson put it on, and was curious enough to say: "Did you think you could find out what Stribling's protective mixture was from those grease spots?"

"Mere-force of habit," laughed the chemist, putting on his own coat. "I'm obliged to analyze everything I get hold of, you know; it's a sort of disease with me, I guess."

"But could you tell what it was, just from those discolored washings?" queried Maxwell.

"Perfectly. Mr. Stribling's 'patent' is a compound in which the chief ingredient is a grease derived from the spent lye of the soap-makers, and one of the principal uses of which in the arts is, as Mr. Stribling says, to keep oils, and other things, from drying out." Then, more pointedly to the superintendent: "I suppose you'll go up to the tunnel and look the job over, making our careful young friend Stribling entirely happy, won't you?"

Maxwell looked at his watch.

"Perhaps I'd better. Benson wants to get back, anyway. Will you two go along?"—to Sprague and Starbuck.

"I don't mind," said the expert, with a barely perceptible nod to Starbuck; and after he had rearranged the chemicals on his newly made shelves the four left the office and had themselves dropped to the ground floor of the building.

It was while they were walking two and two down the street that Sprague dropped a few steps behind with Starbuck and passed him a carefully wrapped package which he took from under his coat.

"I have another little experiment in mind, Mr. Starbuck," he said in low tones. "When we are on our way through the tunnel, watch your opportunity to drop out of the procession long enough to empty the contents of that package into the patent grease, which you will find, not floating on the oil, but in some sort of a receptacle let into the top of the oil tank of that safety contrivance which Mr..

Benson has so accurately described for us. I'm curious enough to want to prove up on my analysis of a few minutes ago—to see if it was correct."

"What will happen if it was correct?"

"Nothing; nothing alarming, I assure you. But be careful not to get any of the stuff in that package on your hands when you break the paraffin seals. And perhaps it might be as well if you don't let our young electrical friend see you do it. He might think we were messing in where we had no business to."

Starbuck made a sign of complete understanding, and a few minutes later, when they reached the main street, made a time-saving suggestion.

"Suppose you folks take a taxi to the roundhouse," he said. "I'll mosey up to the despatcher's office and get your clear-track orders for you."

Maxwell approved the suggestion and they separated, Starbuck catching a passing electric car for the plaza-fronting railroad headquarters, and Maxwell impressing the first auto hack he could find to take the remaining three of them directly to the western yards. The hackman drove across the city and let them out at the nearest street crossing, and from thence they walked the final hundred yards over the ties of the shop track.

At the roundhouse door they met a big, bearded man whose carefully creased brown hat and rather vociferous business suit would have marked him elsewhere as a gentleman of elegant, if somewhat precarious, leisure. Judson Bascom was this gentleman's name, and he was comparatively a newcomer in the Short Line service; having been appointed to succeed Fred Dawson, master mechanic, promoted.

Bascom was stooping to pat a stray dog, but he rose to his feet when the three came down upon him.

"You're the man we're looking for, Bascom," said Maxwell shortly. "I want a light engine to go up to Tunnel Number Three. What have you got in?"

The big master mechanic twiddled the bunch of charms on his watch-fob, and the stray dog began to sniff warily at Benson's heels.

"The Nine-fifteen's got fire in her; will she do?"

"Yes. Get me a crew as quickly as you can. I want a man who isn't afraid to run."

The man in the brown hat and the loud plaids dragged out a fat gold watch and shook his head.

"I guess that'll be me. There's nobody 'round, and I suppose you

wouldn't want to wait until I can send the caller out after somebody?"

"No; I'm in a hurry," snapped the boss. "Let's get a move. My car is in the shop, so you can couple onto that caboose over there on the split track. There are four of us to go, and we'd crowd you in the cab."

Big and leisurely-looking as he was, the master mechanic made good time. In a minute or two he had the smart, light eight-wheeler on the turntable, with the blower roaring, a redheaded pit-boy to fire, and half a dozen roundhouse men to put their shoulders to the table levers. The shifting took five minutes more; and by that time a switching engine, with Starbuck hanging from the step, came racing down the yard from the mile-away headquarters.

Starbuck swung off before the switcher came to a stop, and joined the three who were waiting at the step of the caboose.

"Hell's a-poppin'," he said laconically. "Davis hasn't got a single west wire that he can use. They all went out, blink, about twenty minutes ago."

"What's that?" demanded Maxwell. "Not all of them, surely!"

"Every blamed one—commercial wires and all. Can't get a whisper out of anything west of Little Butte. He says it acts like a general 'ground,' and then again it don't."

The nattily dressed master mechanic had dropped from his engine step to come and join the group at the caboose. Maxwell put him in possession of the blockading fact in a brief sentence.

"The wires are dead and we'll have to bluff our way from siding to siding. Are you game for it, Bascom?"

The big man inclined his head. "I guess so," he said.

"All right. Go to Little Butte for the first lap. There is nothing in the way between here and the junction. All aboard, gentlemen."

The start was made briskly enough, but two miles beyond the yard limits the caboose car chucked noisily as Bascom slowed for the single-span bridge over the Gloria.

"Good Gad!" raged Maxwell, jumping up and jerking the air-whistle cord for full speed ahead. "If he's going to slow up for every trestle we come to, we'll never get anywhere!"

"We can prod him," said Benson.

For the few miles intervening between the bridge and Little Butte the master mechanic did not need prodding. Taking the air-whistle hint for what it meant, he hurled the wild train around the curves and over the tangents wholly without regard for the comfort of the four men who vainly tried to keep their seats on the

bunk benches in the caboose. At Silver Switch the landscape was merely a blur; and in rounding the great side-cut at the Butte bluff the short car shrieked and groaned and seemed to be riding like a toe-balancer on the outer rail.

At the Little Butte stop the four made a dash for the operator's office, where Bascom presently joined them. There was no information to be got out of Wooffert, the station agent. His wires were working north on the Red Butte branch, but there was a dead "ground" somewhere to the westward. Broken snatches were still coming through from Caliger, ten miles up the main line west, and the instruments acted as if somebody had been pouring cold molasses into them.

Maxwell had his pocket time-card out, though he did not need to consult it. "Sixteen and Eighteen are somewhere between here and Nophi," he announced. "We've got to find and pass them as we can. Let her go, Bascom."

A half-minute later the up-valley race was begun. In the lower reaches the tangents were long, giving the volunteer engineer measurably safe sights ahead; and there was no occasion for Maxwell to jerk the whistle cord. Again the big man in the engine cab was hurling the train along with small regard for anything but speed.

At Caliger another stop was made. Like the man at Little Butte, the operator knew nothing save that his wires were dead. At his last report both of the down-coming freight trains had been on time. Maxwell did some quick figuring.

"We're pretty safe to run to Hatcher's," he told Bascom. "That will give us five minutes against Sixteen, provided she's not running ahead of her schedule. Can you make Hatcher's in forty minutes?"

"I'll make it or land this outfit in hell," said the master mechanic grittingly. And once again the wheels began to spin.

It proved to be a close call at Hatcher's, the little "blind" siding in the upper valley. One mile short of the passing track Bascom began to blow his whistle like a madman, and the four on the caboose, leaning far out on the platforms, saw a long freight lumbering down from the west. A short, stabbing puff of steam from the freight locomotive's whistle, soundless because of the din of hammering wheels and shrieking flanges, told them that the freight engineer had seen and heard and was trying to stop. Also, it was apparent to the two who looked on with railroad knowledge that the stop could not be made within the siding's switch limits.

Bascom took a chance and a risky one. Speeding like a fiend, he sent his one-car train onward to what promised to be a smashing head-on collision with the freight. But at the lower switch, with the slowing freight less than three hundred yards away, he made a grinding stop; his fireman leaped from the gangway and ran to turn the switch; and an instant later the wild train was snatched in on the siding and the freight was rolling past in safety over the reset switch.

"Good work!" said Sprague, speaking for the first time since the departure from Little Butte. "This man Bascom may not be the heavy villain that he looks to be, but he is certainly carrying his nerve with him this afternoon."

Maxwell was leaning out and shouting to the volunteer in the cab. "Easy, Bascom!" he yelled; "they're carrying green!"

Bascom looked back and nodded; and the red-headed fireman strolled on ahead to take his stand at the upper switch.

"Anything significant about the St. Patrick's Day color?" queried Sprague; and Maxwell said there was.

"It means another section following," he explained; and then: "Here it comes!" And as he said it, another freight came into view, plunging around the curves toward the siding.

Unhappily for the speed-making purpose, this train, too, was carrying green, and Maxwell swore impatiently to the universe in general. "Three sections to this; and Eighteen's pretty sure to have two or more. It's three fifty-five, right now, and we've got thirty miles to go!"

Benson laughed.

"Stribling will wait until the last minute for you, never fear. With two hours we could mighty near get out and walk it."

"I reckon we're going to get a chance to walk a piece of the way," said Starbuck in his slow drawl. "That maverick choochoo wrangler up ahead will have us in the ditch before he hits the Nophi grades, if he keeps up his lick."

"I don't want to call him down," said Maxwell, dubiously. "He's probably got a grouch because I pulled the string on him back yonder at the Gloria bridge."

"There comes the third section!" Benson called out; and a minute afterward the third and last division of the overland freight went hurtling past on the main track.

Bascom's makeshift fireman was promptly on his job. While the tailend of the third section was clanking over the frogs he jerked the switch, and at the same instant the master mechanic jerked

the throttle of the Nine-fifteen. The wild train shot out into position on the main line, halted for the fraction of a minute needed to enable the fireman to run up and scramble to the footboard, and the breakneck race was continued.

By this time none of the four thought of going back into the caboose. They were crowded together upon the front platform, ready to make the leap for life which seemed momentarily imminent as Bascom snatched the short car recklessly around the curves and over the switches at the various stations. Train Number Eighteen, also a through freight, was scheduled one hour behind Sixteen; but in the absence of all wire reports of its progress, nobody knew just where it would be found.

As a matter of fact, it was met between two sidings, ten miles on the hither side of Nophi; and, happily for the safety of all concerned, the meeting with the first section chanced upon a piece of straight track—one of the exceedingly few tangents in the rough, gulch-like valley known as Tumble-Tree Canyon. As before, Bascom held his whistle open, and, thanks to the brakes and a liberal sanding of the rails, a collision was averted.

When the two locomotives were nose to nose, and a flagman was racing frantically back to flag the following section, Maxwell sprang off and fell upon the conductor of the freight.

"How many sections of you?" he demanded explosively.

"Two," said the man, putting up an arm as if he expected to be hit.

"How close are you?" was the next shot-like question.

"That's them, comin' now," said the conductor, as a hoarse whistle bellow answered the racing flagman's stop signal.

Two miles back of the halted freights there was a disused sawmill spur, not over a hundred feet long, to be sure, but it would serve. Maxwell's decision was made instantly.

"Back up, both of you, until we can get in on Crawford's spur," he ordered; and as the conductor started to run to the rear: "Don't waste time doing that! Whistle for 'em, you blockhead!" and he made impatient motions as of an engineer pulling the whistle lever.

The first-section engineer, leaning from his cab window, heard, saw, and understood. Three shrieks of his whistle were answered by three of the hoarse bellows from the rear, and the two long freights began to pound heavily in the reverse motion up the grade.

"Push 'em, Bascom!" shouted Maxwell, as his own engine crept up after the retreating first section. "We'll go in at Crawford's and let 'em by."

The two miles to the passing point, worried out slowly at the pace set by the laboring freights, seemed to stretch themselves out into ten. Sprague was looking at his watch.

"Sixteen miles yet, you say, and we have an hour and twenty minutes in which to make them. That looks as if we were still margined well enough to pull through."

"I guess so," said Maxwell. The laboring freights were at last backing around the curve from which the sawmill spur branched off, and again the redheaded fireman was on hand with his switch-key. Luckily the unused lock did not refuse to work, and presently the light rails of the abandoned spur were buckling and bending ominously under the Nine-fifteen, as Bascom trundled the wild train out upon them.

Almost immediately the whistles screamed again, and the two freights slid away down the grade. "Right!" yelled the redheaded one, shifting the rusty switch again; and once more the race was resumed.

When the Nophi smelter stacks came in sight in the vista opened up by the flying swing around the mountain of approach, four watches were out.

"We're nearly an hour to the good yet," cried Benson.

"Yes; and we ain't there yet," said Starbuck, who seemed to have acquired a pessimistic slant.

Maxwell swung far out as they were rounding the great curve and got a clear view of the small smelter-town yard. Straightening up, he pulled the whistle cord to attract Bascom's attention, and then leaned out and made the necessary hand signal to run through the small town without stopping.

In some inexplicable way the signal, or rather the giving and receiving of it, proved fatal. Bascom looked back to nod his understanding, and when he faced about again he saw, too late, that a boxcar, set out by one of the lately passing freights on the smelter-loading track, had "drifted" down the siding to a point at which it would not clear the main line. There was a ripping crash, a roar of steam escaping through a broken cylinder, and the race, so far as Engine Nine-fifteen was concerned, was over.

When the four passengers had picked themselves up out of the heap into which the sudden stop had piled them, they went forward to see what was to be done. There was nothing to be done locomotive-wise; but there was still plenty of time, even if the six remaining miles should have to be covered by a picked-up team borrowed from the smelter folk.

But the team expedient proved unnecessary. At the Nophi station they found a section gang at work, with a handcar available; and on the "pump special" they made their entry, some thirty minutes past five, into the Grafton Brothers' camp at the eastern tunnel approach.

Stribling, a handsome young fellow with a frank, open face and honest eyes, was on hand to meet them.

"By Jove, Mr. Maxwell!" he said, with what was apparently a most palpable relieving of anxious strain, "I was afraid you weren't coming, and I'd just about made up my mind to phone over to Lopez to tell Canby and the rest of them that we'd postpone. I've got my record to make yet, most of it, and I couldn't afford to turn that power on and start an engine through until after you and Benson have gone over the completed installation with me."

"Well," Maxwell rejoined, "that's what we're here to do. You know Starbuck, my brother-in-law? I thought so. Now shake hands with my friend Sprague, of the Department of Agriculture, and we'll go through with you."

Starbuck was watching Stribling's face when the young electrical engineer shook hands with the big man from Washington. There was a query in the younger man's eyes, and Starbuck saw it. Also, he marked the half-second of hesitation which came between the introduction and its acknowledgment. But a moment later they were all on their way to the black-mouthed tunnel, Stribling walking ahead with the superintendent and Sprague, and Starbuck following with Benson.

For convenience in his work Stribling had set up a small steam-driven dynamo at his camp and had strung the tunnel with incandescents; hence there was plenty of light in the long bore for the examination of the power wiring. When they plunged underground the construction man was still walking ahead with Maxwell and Sprague, explaining, for the benefit of the superintendent's guest, the design of the catenary brackets and the double set of insulators.

"I'm betting on every detail in the mile and a quarter," the young engineer was saying, as the two laggards closed up. "It's my first big job, as Mr. Maxwell knows"—this also for the guest—"and I've simply got to make good on it. I could have had that waiting motor-engine out there pulling trains through the mountain this morning, but I made up my mind that we wouldn't turn a wheel until Mr. Maxwell had seen everything for himself."

"That's business," said Sprague, encouragingly. "Old Davy Crockett's maxim, eh? 'Be sure you're right, and then go ahead.'"

But let me tell you, Mr. Stribling: Mr. Maxwell will look wise and say, 'Yes, yes,' but he'll have to take your word for it, after all. What we average people don't know about modern electrical installations would fill a—" he looked around as if in search of a measure of capacity—"would fill a tank as big as that one across the track—the one you've dipped your wires into over there in that side cave."

"The oil-switch, you mean? Yes, that is a little safety wrinkle we're putting in wherever there's a chance of an accident breaking down the power wires. I'll explain it as we come back."

When the young engineer led the way onward again a glance to the rear would have shown him that only three of the four were at his heels. Starbuck had seen his chance, and in a quick withdrawal he dodged into the side cavern housing the oil-switch. Two of the empty dynamite boxes enabled him to breast the top of the tall iron tank. What he saw was a little puzzling. Oil-switch tanks are usually left open to the air, but this one was fitted with a galvanized-iron cover made in the form of a shallow pan with double sides spaced about six inches apart. The inner compartment of the pan was half filled with a transparent oily liquid, and the outer annular space around it was closely packed with chopped ice. Hastily breaking the seals of the package he had been carrying under his coat, he dumped the contents into the central receptacle and fled without waiting to prove Sprague's assertion that nothing alarming would happen. When he rejoined the inspection party Sprague was still holding Stribling in talk, and the young mine owner made sure it was done to cover his own momentary absence.

The remainder of the trip through the tunnel was made without incident, and on the way back Stribling halted the party at the safety-switch side cavern which, oddly enough, was charged with a curiously acrid odor that made breathing in it chokingly difficult. Coughing and gasping, Stribling explained the mechanism briefly. An electromagnet, energized by the power current itself, held the switch in contact. If the current should be interrupted, as in the case of a breakage due to a wreck, the switch would be thrown and all the tunnel wires rendered instantly harmless.

"And these boxes are what your machinery came in?" said Sprague, pointing to a litter of small dust-covered packing cases scattered about the tank.

"Oh, no; those are dynamite boxes," was the hoarse reply. "They are empty—at least, Mr. Benson says they are, and he ought to know, since they are some of his leavings." And then: "Suppose we

move on. The air is frightfully bad in here. The engineer must have stopped the ventilating fans."

Sprague had picked up a rusty bolt left by the timber framers.

"You've got a good solid oil tank here," he said, hammering lustily on the iron with the bolt.

Starbuck was watching Stribling, and he would have sworn that the young engineer's jump took him two feet clear into the air.

"Great Scott! Don't do that, Mr. Sprague!" he cried. "You might break some of the—some of the adjustments, you know!"

Sprague's mellow laugh echoed hollowly in the timbered cavern.

"If they're that delicate, perhaps we'd better take your suggestion and move on," he said. "I guess we've seen enough, anyway, eh, Maxwell?"

The superintendent acquiesced and the tunnel-threading was resumed to the portal, and beyond to the little shack where Stribling had his office. Here the young man became the hospitable host.

"Sit down, gentlemen, and I'll call Canby at the power plant and ask him if he is all ready to 'cut in.' If he says yes, you can take the phone and give the order, Mr. Maxwell. It's your railroad."

The four disposed themselves as they pleased in the cramped little office fronting the tunnel. Sprague took his stand at the single window to stare absently at the black hole in the mountain side—an unrelieved spot of gloom now that the incandescents had been turned off. Starbuck chose a corner, and did not take his eyes from Stribling, who was sitting at his desk with Maxwell opposite.

With the receiver at his ear the young engineer exchanged a few words with the company's electrician at the power house three miles away. Then he pushed the phone across the desk to Maxwell.

"Canby says he's ready," he announced, in a voice that was strangely sharp and tremulous. "Give him the word, and then watch this volt-meter on the wall behind me. It will tell you when the current comes on."

Maxwell hesitated for a single instant and looked across at Sprague. But the expert's back was turned and he was still staring fixedly at the distant tunnel mouth. The superintendent took the receiver and spoke crisply.

"This is Maxwell: if you're ready, turn on the power."

At the word, Sprague faced about quickly and fixed his gaze upon Stribling. The young man had turned aside in his chair and his face was ghastly. Benson and Maxwell were watching the indicator on the wall; but Starbuck was rising noiselessly from his seat on

the cot, with one hand buried in the sidepocket of his coat. For ten dragging seconds the index finger of the volt-meter remained motionless. Stribling was twitching in his chair, and finally he burst out.

"Those dynamite boxes! We ought to have taken them out! What if they shouldn't happen to be empty—all of them?"

As he spoke, the index of the volt-meter began to jump like a thing suddenly endowed with life, and Benson cried out, "There she comes!" Stribling crouched in his chair as if shrinking from a blow and covered his face with his hands. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, ticked themselves off on the little desk clock at Maxwell's elbow, and then Sprague's voice broke into the tense silence.

"It's all over, Stribling. You can sit up now and take your medicine. The end of the world is still safely in the future."

The young man whirled in his chair and his right hand shot toward a half-opened drawer of the desk. It was Starbuck who interposed.

"Nixie," he said sharply; "it isn't time for you to pass out yet. Keep your hands out of that drawer, or I'll put these on," jingling a pair of handcuffs before the culprit's staring eyes.

Stribling leaped from his chair and took one long haggard look through the open door at the tunnel mouth where nothing was happening. Then he dropped back and became the trapped animal fighting for life.

"What have you got on me?—or what is it you think you've got?" he rasped.

It was the man from Washington who replied.

"Don't make it harder for yourself than you have to," he said gently. "We've got it all. We know that you had that train stopped last night so that you could unload those empty dynamite boxes—they are empty, you know—without discovery. We also know that this morning you placed a quantity of nitroglycerine in that safety switch, and that you have the wiring rigged to fire the stuff and destroy the tunnel."

The young man looked up and his smile showed his teeth.

"But the current is on and the tunnel isn't destroyed," he interrupted.

"No; you overdid it a little in asking Benson to help you handle the nitroglycerine and in letting him spill it on his clothes; also you skipped a stitch when you thought that by smuggling those dynamite boxes in and calling everybody's attention to them, you'd put the blame of the explosion upon Benson and the railroad people.

You forgot that all makers of dynamite nowadays stamp the date on the boxes. The tunnel was completed two years ago; and the date on one of the boxes, at least, is January of the present year. You are down and out, Mr. Stribling, and there is only one way in which you can dodge the stripes. That is by telling us who hired you to do this."

A silence, tense like the silence of the courtroom when the judge pronounces the sentence, fell upon the group gathered in the little shack-office, and it lasted for a full minute. At the end of it Stribling jerked his head up and spoke.

"I'm a man again now, Mr. Sprague, if I haven't been for the past two months," he said steadily. "I'll tell you this: you can give me the third degree, if you want to—there are enough of you here to do it—and after that you can send me to the pen if you feel like it. But, so help me God, you'll never make me welsh on the man for whom I did this: never, so long as I have the breath to say no!"

Again the tense silence supervened, and Starbuck held up the handcuffs tentatively. Sprague shook his head, and spoke again.

"You've considered this resolution well, have you, Stribling?"

"I have. I owe that man everything I've got in this world: education, the chance to hold my head up with others and, more than that, he once saved my father from going where you mean to send me—over the road. I'll admit all you have charged. I did set the trap, and I don't know yet why it hasn't gone off. All I ask is that you'll remember that I picked a time when there wouldn't be any lives lost."

"I discovered that last night," said Sprague quietly; adding, with a glance for the superintendent's brother-in-law, "I guess we'll have to turn him over to you, Mr. Starbuck." Then, turning once more upon the culprit: "Why did you find it necessary to cross the power wires with the telegraph lines early this afternoon, and so to destroy the instruments on a hundred miles of railroad, Stribling?"

The young engineer looked up hardily. "It was necessary. I took care to have Canby and the railroad electricians all over at the power plant, and I couldn't take the chance of leaving them in communication with the headquarters at Brewster."

Maxwell, who had sat as a silent listener, shook his head sadly and got up and went out, followed by Benson. A little later Sprague, standing at the window, saw them trying out the electric locomotive in short runs up and down the tunnel approach. Starbuck came out of his corner and snapped the manacles on Stribling's wrists, and the young man made no resistance. Sprague turned at the click of

the handcuffs, standing to frown down thoughtfully upon the self-confessed wrecker.

"I was in hopes we were going to get the men higher up this time; get them so they would stay got," he said, half to himself. "But it seems that a bit of common human gratitude is going to blunder around and get in the way. Stribling, I'm honestly sorry for you. I'm afraid we made a mistake in not letting you get hold of that gun a few minutes ago."

The young man with the honest eyes looked up quickly. "You did, indeed, Mr. Sprague. It's the simplest way out of it for me."

"You are still determined not to do the larger justice by giving us the information we need?"

The young man raised his manacled hands.

"Think of it a minute," he pleaded. "You wouldn't do it yourself; you know you wouldn't."

"I don't know—I don't know; perhaps I shouldn't," admitted the big man thoughtfully. Then he went on with visible reluctance: "I'm afraid we shall have to pinch you, and pinch you hard, my boy. And it's a shame, when you were only a tool in the hands of the men who ought to do time for this thing. I suppose we shall be taking the seven o'clock passenger back to Brewster. Is there anything you'd like to do before it comes along?"

"Yes; I'd like to write a letter or two."

"You shall do it, and you shall have privacy." And then to Starbuck: "Fix him so that he can."

Starbuck unlocked the manacle from Stribling's right wrist and locked it again around the arm of the office chair. "Will that give you room enough?" he asked.

"More than enough," was the quiet reply. And when Starbuck had taken the pistol from the half-opened desk drawer the two who were free went out and closed the door against any possible intrusion upon the captive's privacy.

"I'll stay round," Starbuck volunteered, when they were outside. "You go over and ride the engine with Mr. Maxwell, if you want to."

It was half an hour later when the three who had been trying out the electric locomotive sidetracked the big machine at the sound of the down passenger's whistle signal at the western tunnel approach, and crossed the tracks to where Starbuck was standing guard at the reopened door of the office-shack.

"Still writing?" asked Sprague of the silent guard.

"No; for the last ten minutes he's been sitting there with his

head on the table, just as you see him. He asked me to open the door a while ago, so he could see better."

Moved by a common impulse they entered the office room stepping softly. But the young man at the desk was far beyond all earthly disturbances. One letter, addressed to a girl in New York, lay on the desk, stamped and sealed. Hanging beside the chair, and ingeniously strung and weighted so that they could touch nothing, were the two heavily insulated power wires which he had somehow managed to disconnect from the volt-meter switchboard at his back; these and a freshly burned shrivel on the hand of the arm that was crooked for a pillow told how it had been done.

"Good God!" Maxwell exclaimed; "we might have thought of that! Poor fellow! He couldn't face it out after all!"

Starbuck gently released the handcuffs and slipped them into his pocket. Then he helped Benson put the body of the man who could not face it out upon the cot in the corner. The train was coming, and Benson pushed the others toward the door.

"Don't stay here and miss your train," he said. "I'll do what there is to be done. I was going to stay, anyway."

The evening train was feeling its way down over the wireless line and was halfway to Brewster before the three men sitting in the otherwise unoccupied smoking compartment of the sleeper broke the silence which the sudden tragedy had laid upon them. But at the lighting of his third cigar Maxwell could contain himself no longer. "It's another of your miracles, Calvin," he said. "By this time I'm so well used to them that nothing you do fazes me any more. But I'm sure Billy will sleep better tonight if you tell him how you did it."

The big man grunted softly.

"I think both of you have put the broken bits of the puzzle together before this," he returned. "The motive was the chief thing; what I call the 'nucleus thought,' and we had that all ready-made. We knew that this 'Big Nine,' as Ford names it, was out after your scalp; and as soon as you told me about the tunnel and the Grafton Brothers' contract the probable point of attack was no longer in doubt. You see, I happen to know that the Graftons have always been hand-in-glove with your principal competitor—had installed all the block signals for it, cutting a fine melon for themselves in the process, too."

"Still," said Maxwell, "it's a long way from that to this."

"It was only taking one step after another, and Benson gave me three or four of them. The details of Stribbling's exceedingly simple

plot became very plain after Benson had told us about the train-stopping, the empty dynamite boxes, the safety switch—which could have been just as easily and effectively placed at either end of the tunnel as in that hole in the middle of it—and finally about the pouring of the syrupy stuff into the oil-tank. There was a bit of fine work on Stribling's part. Benson doubtless knows nitroglycerine when he sees it; but under the circumstances he would be completely disarmed—as he was."

"But how did you know that there would be a false cover on the tank?" queried Starbuck.

"A bit of pure reasoning. The specific gravity of glycerine is greater than that of the heaviest of the earth oils; hence the explosive would sink to the bottom of the tank and mix with the oil to some extent. I reasoned that Stribling would not take the risk of the mixture."

"He didn't," said the mine owner; "the pan was there and it was packed in ice."

"But the laboratory experiment?" put in Maxwell.

"Was a simple test for nitroglycerine, of course. You saw it blow up the test-tube, but even then only one of you—Mr. Starbuck here—suspected the truth. You did, didn't you, Mr. Starbuck?"

"I had a guess comin'," said the young mine owner quietly; adding: "That was why I took the trouble to hunt me up a pair of handcuffs when I went to get the train-orders."

"But if there was nitroglycerine in that tank, why didn't it go off when the current was turned on?" queried Maxwell.

"For the very simple reason that Mr. Starbuck, at my direction, dumped a large dose of neutralizing chemical into it as we passed the tank on our way through the tunnel, and so saponified it. That was why I had the courage to hammer on the tank with my bolt, and why Stribling, not dreaming that his touchy explosive's teeth had been drawn, nearly had a fit."

"One other thing," Maxwell put in. "You asked Stribling why he burned the telegraph wires out; how did you know they had been burned out?"

Sprague chuckled goodnaturedly.

"I knew that at Little Butte; you might have known it if you hadn't been so excited as to forget that you had a nose. That office, as well as the next one—I've forgotten its name—fairly reeked with the smell of burnt rubber and insulation, and I said to myself that there were only two torches in these mountains that could heat things hot enough to burn the instruments; namely, lightning and

the high-voltage current from your plant in Lopez Canyon."

Again a silence, broken only by the train clamor, settled down upon the three in the Pullman smoking room. After a time Maxwell drew a long breath and said:

"It was a narrow squeak; a horribly narrow squeak, Calvin. We have a good deal to say nowadays about the lawlessness of the mob and the individual; but big money doesn't seem to know that there are any such things as justice and equity and a square deal."

Sprague sat up and methodically relighted his cigar.

"Oh, I don't know about that," he demurred. "You can't say that all big money is lawless. Of course, there are buccaneers in every chapter of the world's history, and we have ours, neatly labeled with the dollar mark instead of the skull and crossbones. Good big money is an undoubted blessing; it is only bad big money that is a curse."

Maxwell's smile was mirthless.

"When a man puts a gun in your face and holds you up, it isn't very consoling to remember that there are a good many other men in the world who wouldn't treat you that way," he commented. And then: "I hope we've seen the last of this fight in the dark with that stock-jobbing gang in New York."

"You haven't," Sprague declared definitely. "They'll come back at you, and keep on coming back, until you get a fair grand-jury underhold on the men at the top. I counted confidently upon being able to give you that underhold today. I thought we had Stribling where he would be obliged to turn state's evidence. It was our misfortune that he happened to be too good a man; that he was only the tool of a villain and not a villain himself. They'll hit you again, Maxwell, and go on hitting you until you can strike back hard enough to put some of the men higher up in the prisoner's dock."

This might have stood for the final word; but the true finality was reached a couple of hours later when the superintendent and the government expert were smoking their bedtime pipes in the Topaz lobby.

"We haven't fully grasped the real pity of this thing yet, Dick," said Sprague, at the end of the ends. "It is this: that greed, the infernal lust of money that has laid hold upon our day and generation, can take so fine a thing as that poor boy's gratitude, transform it into criminality, and make him pay the price with his life. Isn't that enough to make your blood run cold? Let's turn in and forget it if we can. Good night. I'm going to bed."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Sheila Smith

Anyone who's blessed, as I am, with a neighborhood bookstore that's well-stocked with mystery titles is aware that a number of paperback houses are publishing mysteries. In addition to original novels and reprints of recent hardcover sellers, they are also bringing back into print some very worthy books from the past. Margery Allingham, for instance, was largely out of print several years ago when I made her the subject of this column; now many, if not all, of her twenty-five books are available in paperback. That's true of Arthur Upfield, too, another profile subject. You can now follow the adventures of his detective, Bony, at paperback prices.

Peter Dickinson and his self-effacing Scotland Yard man, Pibble, was also recommended reading in these pages. Like the other authors I've mentioned, he was not readily available. **Sleep and His Brother**, written in 1971, was then out of print, but Pantheon Books has just reprinted it in paperback (\$3.95, 218 pp.), which brings the number of Dickinson titles on their paperback list up to nine. It's not a bad place to start if you've never sampled the Dickinson-Pibble team. The setting is the McNair Foundation, an anachronistic "estate" surrounded by burgeoning modern London and managed as a non-profit institution for terminally ill children

with a very strange, rare disease. Dickinson is an original, and *Sleep* typifies his uncanny ability to create tension from the apparently mundane, and to highlight the extraordinary from a morass of small details. There is a civilized restraint here, even among the criminals Pibble comes up against.

Another series now available in paperback is Lilian Jackson Braun's odd duo of reporter and cat—otherwise known as Qwilleran and Koko. **The Cat Who Could Read Backwards**, originally published in 1966, introduces Jim Qwilleran, veteran newspaper reporter and recently reformed alcoholic, who takes up a new job on a mid-sized city newspaper as reporter of local art news. He knows nothing about art and it's a step down for him, but jobs aren't exactly pouring in. And a controversy the paper's regular art critic has stirred up eventually means that the art news reporter is also covering the homicide beat because soon the local art figures begin turning into corpses. The story of how Qwilleran and Koko, the elegant (and perhaps brilliant?) Siamese cat, team up is best left to the team's creator. Pick up this, or one of Braun's other two books in the series, and see how she handles it for yourself. (Jove Books, \$2.95, 191 pp.)

AHMM readers who pick up John Lutz's novel, **The Right to Sing the Blues** (St. Martin's Press, \$14.95, 175 pp.), may find themselves experiencing a sense of déjà vu. Never fear, there's a logical reason. Lutz's novel was expanded from his story of the same name, published as the cover story in AHMM in May of 1983. For those of you who missed its debut publication, *The Right to Sing the Blues* reprises P.I. Alo Nudger, the dyspeptic dick from *Nightlines*. This one is special for its background, the jazz world. Nudger is hired by the once-famous clarinetist, Fat Jack. Jack is now the owner of a New Orleans jazz club, and he's concerned about the budding romance between his popular pianist and his young female singer. It seems the girl is the daughter of a local gangster, incognito so that she can make her career "on her own." But the gangster has made it clear to Fat Jack that he expects the big man to act as guardian. And the brilliant jazz pianist who has the girl infatuated doesn't make Fat Jack any too comfortable with his role. Nudger goes through some grim episodes—including murder, a bad beating, and a kidnapping—none of which helps soothe his chronic ulcer. Lutz has expanded his short story into a smoothly written novel, with a few distinctive characters, some interesting detail to the music background, and a surprising twist ending.

The Game's Afoot

by Matthew J. Costello

There was a time when I devoured mystery books. I gleefully curled up with classics like *Trent's Last Case*, *The Rasp*, and *The Lodger*, and then went on to savor the diverse worldly views of such sleuths as Hercule Poirot, Lord Peter Wimsey, and Lew Archer.

When I began writing about games, for publications ranging from the Los Angeles *Times* to *Analog*, I always had an eye out for mystery games. While I enjoyed the venerable *Clue* ("I accuse Mr. Mustard of murdering Miss Scarlet in the billiard room with the chain saw"), I was always looking for something a bit more, some game that captured the flavor and excitement of a well-constructed mystery.

Well, my waiting has been rewarded, and there are now a variety of games available that should delight any mystery fan. As Basil Rathbone was wont to utter to Watson, "The game is afoot!"

At the top of my list, and a modern classic, is *VCR Clue* (Parker Brothers, Inc., 50 Dunham Road, Beverly, Massachu-

setts 01915; about \$39.00). I originally suspected that this wedding of the game *Clue* and a videotape was doomed to failure. After all, how many times could you play it? It sounded hopelessly boring.

Quite the opposite, I discovered. The game features all the characters from the board game, a cigar-chomping Mr. Green, a slinky Miss Scarlet, a grey-haired Mrs. White, and all the others, played wittily by some very capable actors. A new character, the butler (named Didit), explains how to play.

The game consists of five scenes featuring the characters in various rooms of the mansion, fondling possible murder weapons, secretly spiking the punch with poison, and generally acting suspicious. Players draw cards and receive clues about upcoming scenes, such as "The color-blind woman slicing red and green peppers in scene 3 is the victim." Players can also force clues from other players, and certain cards allow scenes to be replayed.

The beauty of the game (besides the very entertaining tape)

The column that usually occupies this space, "Murder by Direction" by Peter Shaw, will return in the next issue.—ED.

is that it contains three separate mysteries of five scenes each, and each mystery can be used for six completely different games. The murderer and victims change from game to game, and an important clue from the previous game becomes mere idle chatter over cocktails as lightning crashes atmospherically around the mansion.

Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective (Sleuth Publications, Ltd., 689 Florida Street, San Francisco, California 94110; \$18.00) is an award-winning game that can be played alone or with a group.

Players take the role of a consulting detective working the gaslit turf of Victorian England. A case presenting a variety of leads (perhaps a missing person, a fragment of a letter, a distraught wife) is read aloud to all players. And then all of London lies open for your inspection. Perhaps you'll check the newspaper for any clues on that date. If you're lucky, you might discover some useful tidbit about a priceless art object going on display, or an important visiting ambassador. The game provides a stack of newspapers filled with useful (and useless) information.

Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective is an absolutely incredible achievement. Playing the game is rather like reading

a novel in which you get to decide where to go. Winning, in group play, depends on solving the mystery first (which is checked by examining the Solution Book).

Needless to say, the computer revolution has not forgotten mystery buffs. And while there have been many fine mystery text adventures (games that only feature text) like Infocom's **Suspect** (56 Wheeler Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02136; \$39.95) that let people practice their deductive skills, some of the newer games provide text and graphics in an entertaining package. And one of the best is Activision's **Murder on the Mississippi** (P.O. Box 7287, Mountain View, California 94039; \$34.95).

At first, it seems as if the game might be just a bit silly. You control world-renowned sleuth Sir Charles Foxworth and his faithful manservant, Regis Phelps. Sir Charles, with pudgy Regis trailing behind him, can be moved around to explore a three-tiered Mississippi paddle wheeler, the *Delta Princess*. Eventually, Sir Charles discovers a body, and that's when the fun begins. Sir Charles can begin investigating, entering suspects' rooms, questioning them about the deceased, and snooping around for evidence. With a filthy rich widow, a gun-toting philan-

thropist, and a sexy not-so-Southern belle, the characters are all colorful.

The graphics and sound of the game are excellent. The rooms are fun to explore, and various sounds greet each character's appearance, much akin to a movie sound track.

The hottest thing in murder and mayhem these days is the mystery party games. Most of these games come with a mystery to be solved, and roles for guests to act out. The Jamie Swise mystery games such as **The Coffee House Murders** (Just Games, 133 Meadbrook Road, Garden City, New York, 11530; \$20.00) come with a record that gets everyone in the spirit of the game, while TSR's **Party Zone Games** (P.O. Box 756, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin 53147-0756; \$19.95) like **The Inheritance** come with cocktail napkins and fancy invitations. **How to Host a Murder** from Decipher Games (Intuitive Marketing, P.O. Box 56, Norfolk, Virginia 23501; \$25.00) provides intricate cases with instructions on how to run your mystery parties.

Traditional board games continue to be popular (especially in the wake of Trivial Pursuit).

A favorite of mine is **Orient Express Mystery Detective Game** (also from Just Games; \$20.00). I loved having a game that let me wander the narrow

corridors of this lavish train, peeking into well-appointed rooms and trying to solve the mystery before the train arrived at its destination. The game comes with ten cases that depend on a keen use of logic to solve them. Clues can be picked up from suspects and crewmen and by searching rooms. And, when at a station, players can even send telegrams inquiring about some evidence. A separate package of ten new cases is also available.

Scotland Yard (Milton Bradley Company, 1500 Main Street, Springfield, Massachusetts 01101; about \$20.00) is an award-winning game from Europe that has players searching London for the mysterious Mr. X, the most-wanted criminal. One player is Mr. X while the others are the detectives, traveling from Kensington Park to the London Zoo, using buses, taxis, or the underground.

Mr. X's moves are carried out on a plastic grid, kept secret from the other players, while the detectives move on a colorful board depicting central London. Mr. X must surface five times in the game, and if any player occupies his location, he is captured. Players have a limited number of transportation tickets (for taxis, and so on) and if Mr. X isn't caught by the time they're gone, then Mr. X wins the game.

THE STORY THAT WON



Photo by Ralph Steiner

The September Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California. Honorable mentions go to Eileen Korenic of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Tara Untiedt of Burbank, California; Norman V. Kelly of Peoria, Illinois; Catherine Balkin of Brooklyn, New York; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; John Dalbec of Youngstown, Ohio; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; and Dave McKinley of Sacramento, California.

POP SECRET by Don Shaffer

Excerpt from DOD Top Level Meeting (persons without necessary clearance skip to para. 2a)—somewhere in USA

16JUL86 0934GMT

Gen. Titus—"Gentlemen, this is the ultimate weapon in strik . . . er . . . defense capability. Just think, a Liquid Oxygen, Low Level Inter-Planetary Orbital Projector. Project LOLLIPOP must be kept totally secret. I shudder to think of the consequences if the Russians find out . . ."

Excerpt from KGB Top Level Meeting (persons without necessary clearance already in Siberia)—somewhere in USSR

16JUL86 0948GMT

Commissar I. Petrov—"Comrades, Politburo requesting confirmation is Capitalist American LOLLIPOP actual weapon or is futile attempt at clever subterfuge to embarrass Glorious Soviet Union. Comrade Agent Grodsky is on way to New York to report . . ."

Alley behind Roxy Theater—somewhere off Broadway

19JUL86 2230GMT

Stagehand Flynn (with bundle of handbills)—"All right, move along, buddy. No hangin' around here." Comrade Grodsky (pointing to sign on wall)—"Tell me, is making LOLLIPOP inside?" Flynn—"Hah! Is making one big musical bomb. LOLLIPOP is bad enuff to smell up the whole city for years. They should sell ear plugs with the tickets. Now, beat it, like I said."

Telephone booth—some two blocks from Roxy Theater

19JUL86 2239GMT

Comrade Grodsky (breathless)—"Commissar Petrov, is bad news. LOLLIPOP is worse than first thought. Is combination explosive, harmonic, and chemical warfare. One bomb ruin all of New York for years. Commissar, is New York bigger than Moscow?"

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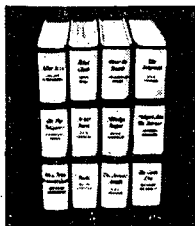
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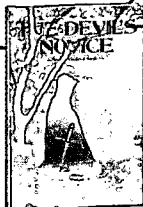
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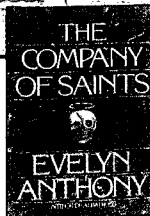
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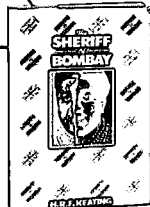
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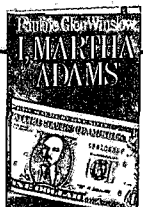
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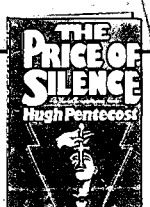
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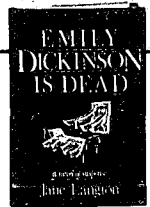
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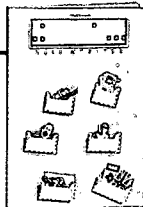
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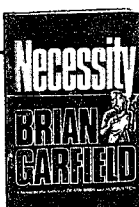
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